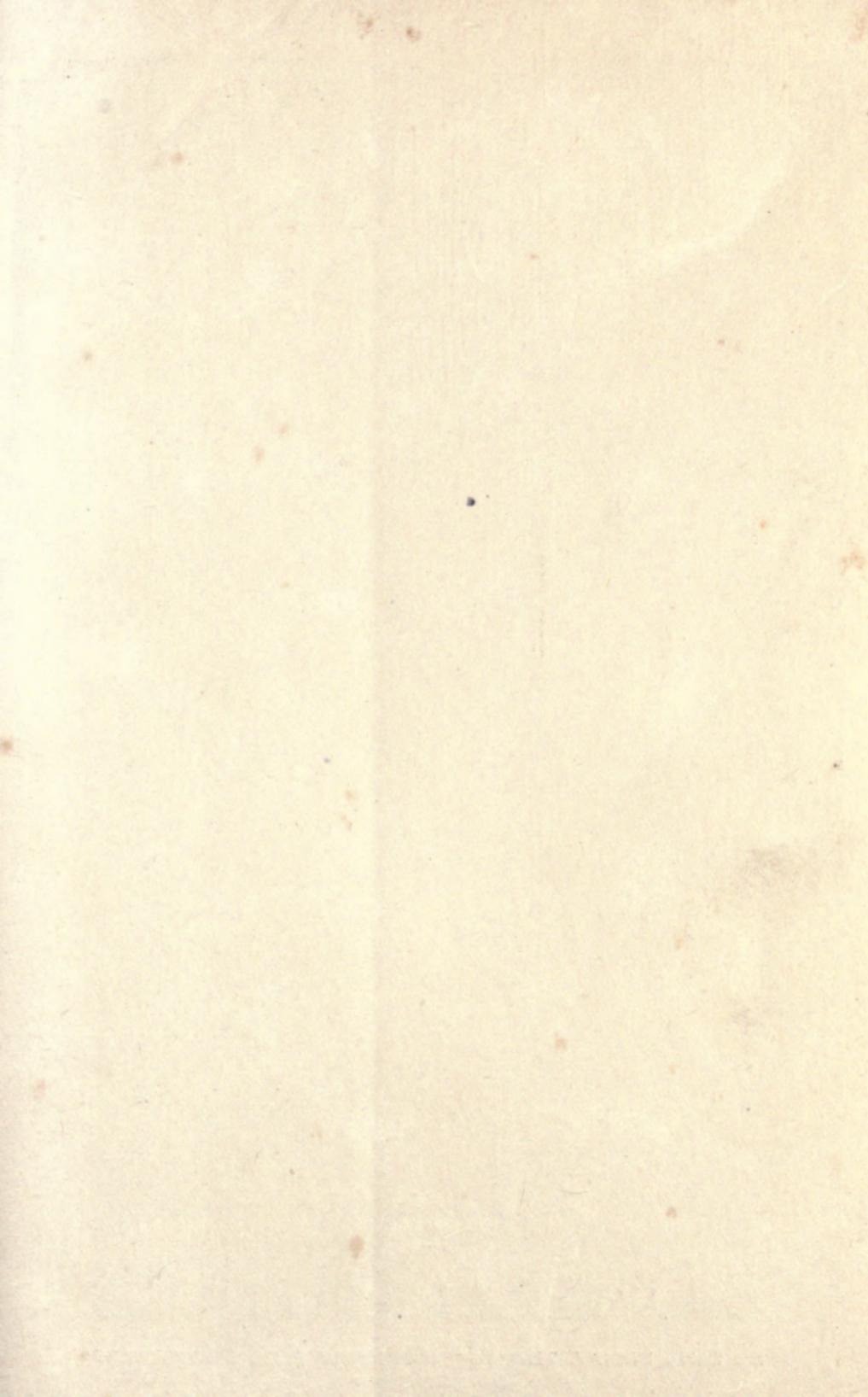
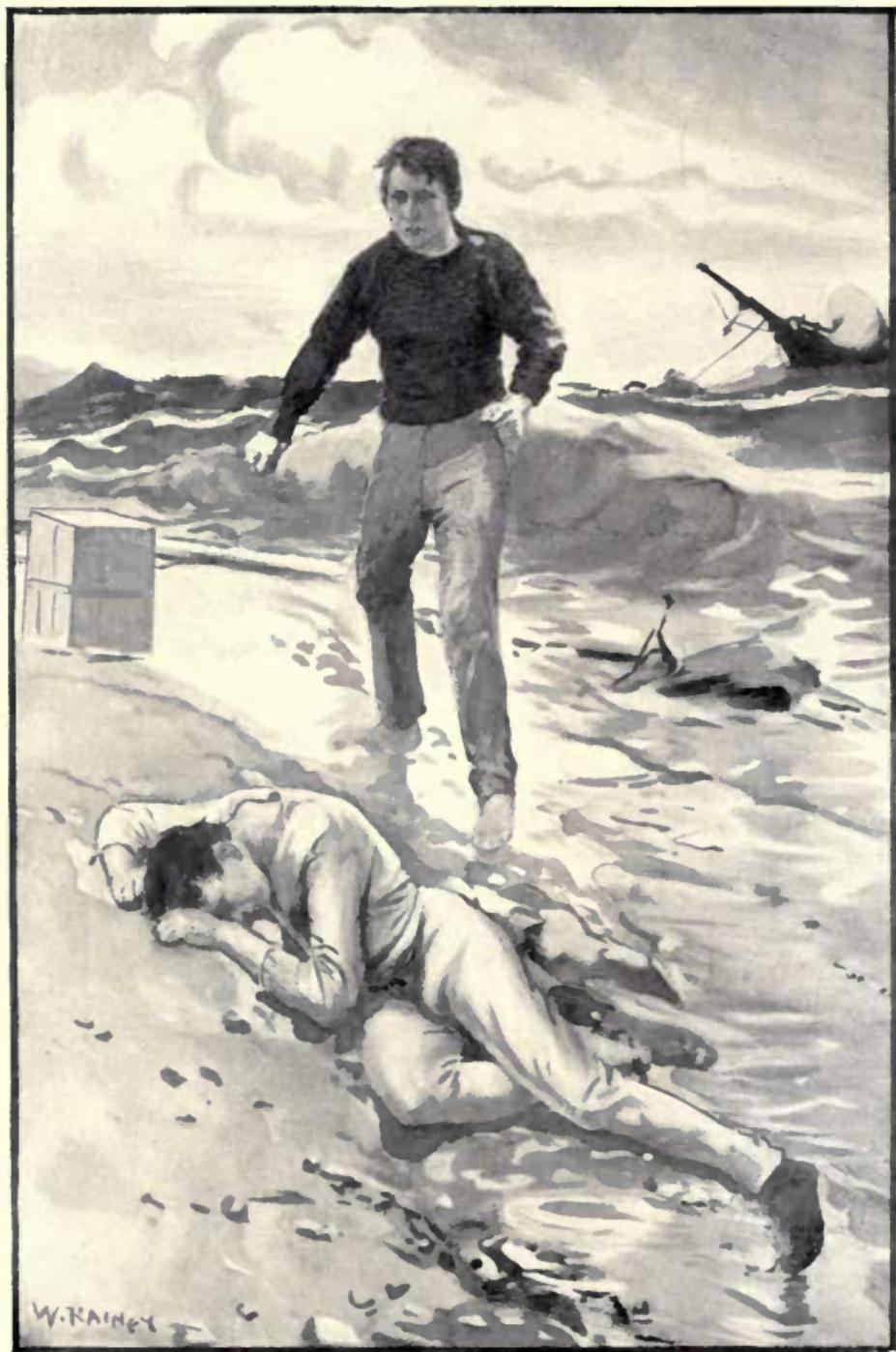


THE BOY CASTAWAYS

H. TAPRELL DORLING







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HE CAME UPON A THIRD FIGURE LYING FACE DOWNWARDS
ON THE SAND

THE BOY CASTAWAYS

Or, Endeavour Island

BY

COMMANDER

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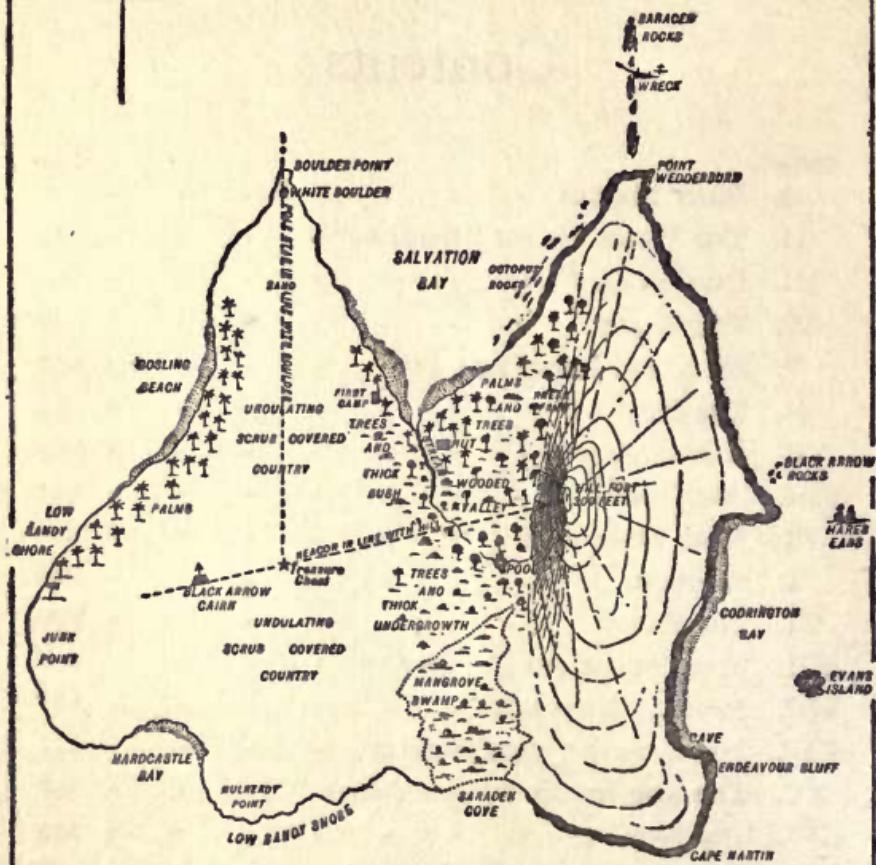
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Contents

CHAP.		Page
I.	BILLY MARTIN	9
II.	THE WRECK OF THE "SARACEN"	19
III.	CAST ON AN ISLAND	24
IV.	THE ISLAND	43
V.	BILLY AND ROGER FALL OUT	57
VI.	THE HUT	73
VII.	A JUNK ARRIVES	83
VIII.	HILL FORT	101
IX.	MORE DISCOVERIES	107
X.	CAPTURED	122
XI.	THE ESCAPE	139
XII.	THE CHINESE ARE DRIVEN OFF	154
XIII.	ANOTHER ADVENTURE	166
XIV.	THE CAVE AND ITS CONTENTS	181
XV.	THE LOG OF THE "BLACK ARROW"	198
XVI.	THE SHIP	213
XVII.	THE SEARCH FOR THE TREASURE	228
XVIII.	TREASURE TROVE	246
XIX.	THE CHINESE RETURN	260
XX.	THE ATTACK ON THE HILL	277
XXI.	DESPAIR	294
XXII.	THE LAST FIGHT	308
XXIII.	H.M.S. "DAPHNE"	321
XXIV.	SAVED	329
XXV.	CONCLUSION	345



— Endeavour Island. —

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THE BOY CASTAWAYS

CHAPTER I

Billy Martin

“COME here, you good-for-nothing little swab!” bellowed Captain Wedderburn, emerging from his cabin into the saloon. “Didn’t I tell you this morning I’d give you a larrupin’ next time you didn’t clean the brasswork properly? Didn’t I now?”

“Please, sir, I cleaned it,” began the frightened boy. “I did it—”

“Don’t you dare argue the point with me, you young shaver!” thundered the skipper, giving his victim a swinging box on the ear with his open hand. “Haven’t you been the bane o’ my life ever since you joined the ship? You can’t do anything as it should be done: can’t clean brasswork unless I stand over you to teach you how; can’t carry the grub aft from the galley without sloppin’ grease all over the deck! It’s all can’t with you; there’s nothing you can do properly!”

He punctuated his remarks with a series of savage blows which made the boy reel against the table.

“You, with your stuck-up airs, and calling yourself a gentleman! More like a bloomin’ guttersnipe! Get out o’ my sight before I lose my temper and hurt you!”

The Boy Castaways

William, otherwise Billy, Martin was only too pleased to take his departure, for this was only one of the occasions on which he had been the victim of the captain's ungovernable temper. He had been struck or kicked practically every day since he had joined the *Saracen*, and for offences which could hardly be called faults from their very triviality. He had become accustomed to the savage treatment, but though he bore it all with stoical pluck and without the least sign of tears, he felt supremely miserable and unhappy.

The captain took every opportunity of bullying him; but what made matters worse, the captain's son, Roger, a boy of the same age as Billy, subjected his less fortunate shipmate to all the petty discomforts and annoyances his fertile and unnaturally virulent mind could devise. Billy was an orphan, and on the death of his father nine months before had been cast out into the world at the age of fifteen to fend for himself. It had been a bitter experience, for his parent had saved little money, having maintained the home and paid for his son's schooling on his salary as a clerk in a London shipping office. For five months the boy, with only a few pounds between him and starvation, had tried for various jobs, but on each occasion he had been unsuccessful on the score of his youth and inexperience. Of friends or relations to whom he could apply for help, he had none, and in those dark days spent in trudging from place to place in the city, looking for work, he had realized what hunger was, and though of a naturally cheerful disposition he had become more and more depressed as his meagre stock of money had gradually dwindled away.

At last, when in a state of absolute desperation, with his clothes in tatters and his boots in holes, he had been forced to accept a berth on board the *Saracen*. To tell the truth, the high-flown title of "steward's assistant" rather attracted him, and he imagined himself clad in a trim jacket

waiting on the passengers at table. All his illusions on the subject, however, were speedily dispelled, for the barque carried no passengers, and he soon found the rough life, menial work, and bad food terribly trying after the comforts of his former home. His duties were manifold, for he had to assist the steward in looking after and keeping tidy the saloon and officers' cabins, while laying the table for meals, washing up dirty plates and dishes, fetching the food to and from the galley on deck, and doing a hundred and one other distasteful jobs, took up all his spare time. Amusements or relaxations he had few, and for the paltry wage of five shillings a week he had to be on his feet from early in the morning till late at night. Even the hours of darkness brought him little comfort. He had a bunk in the deckhouse abaft the galley, which was also inhabited by the cook and steward, and the squalor and filth of this den, combined with the unsavoury habits of his companions, made his gorge rise with disgust.

Everybody on board was his master; for besides having to fetch and carry for the officers, he was also forced to attend to the wants of the cook and steward, who regarded him in the light of a personal attendant. Still, he managed to put up with the horrible life, and he had the sense to realize that if it did nothing else it at least provided him with enough food to keep body and soul together.

He had several friends in the ship, and Mr. Hardcastle, the mate, had taken a fancy to the boy from the first day he had set foot on board; but even his kindness, though it did save him from a certain amount of ill-treatment, could not altogether better his unenviable position. Roger Wedderburn, the captain's son, a great lout of a fellow whom his father had brought to sea to keep him out of mischief ashore, had taken a dislike to Billy from the very first, and as the time hung heavily on his hands, he was

constantly inventing new ways of ill-treating or tormenting the wretched youth whose position did not allow him to retaliate. Roger, though he had been at school, had learnt little; he took no interest in books, and had no absorbing hobby, an unhealthy sign in a boy of his age. He was also a confirmed bully by nature, and if any little thing occurred for which Billy could be held to blame, it was Roger who reported and misrepresented the fact to the captain.

He took a regular delight in persecuting the boy he should have befriended, and did not even hesitate to tell deliberate and carefully-thought-out untruths, to get his victim into trouble. On one occasion Billy, goaded into absolute desperation by the taunts of the bully, and being a stronger though shorter boy than his enemy, went for him and gave him a remarkably good specimen of a black eye, whereat Roger promptly sought his father with tears in his eyes, and a tale of an unprovoked assault on his lying lips. He had richly deserved all he got, and though Captain Wedderburn as usual had taken his son's side, and had administered a severe rope's ending to Billy for his action, the latter really did feel that it had been worth it, and consoled himself by gloating over his adversary as his eye turned from red to black, and from black to yellow.

Billy had joined the *Saracen* four months before, while she was lying in the London Docks, and soon afterwards the vessel had been chartered to take a cargo of Welsh coal from Cardiff to Moji, in Japan. He had speedily recovered from the sea-sickness which prostrated him in the chops of the Channel, and when the ship was scudding to the southward through the North-east Trades, he soon discovered something entirely novel and utterly fascinating in the wind-flecked wastes of the broad Atlantic. The sweet, clean-smelling, salt-scented breezes, the clear-cut horizon all round him, and the majestic sweep of the boundless

waters, unrelieved by the least sign of land, formed an entire but welcome contrast to the aspect to which he had been accustomed. To him it all seemed so very wonderful and strange, and he longed, as many other people have, to know the why and wherefore of everything, while he never tired of pondering over the glories and mysteries of the sea, the most mighty and magnificent of the works of the Creator.

Mr. Hardcastle noticed this trait in the boy's character, and did all he could to foster it; and often during his watches in the fine starlit nights, when there was nothing particular going on, while the ship rushed through the water like a thing of life with every sail set and drawing, he would walk up and down with the boy, answering any questions he chose to ask. The mate was a fine seaman and a well-read man, and his words of wisdom fell on fruitful ground; for Billy was wonderfully intelligent, and by the time Japan was reached he knew a great deal about the way of the sea. He could reel off, for instance, all the prevailing winds in the different oceans; he knew why they blew, and all the regions where calms and storms might be expected; every star in the heavens was an old friend, for he knew them all by name, while he also understood something of the theory of magnetism, and why the compass pointed to the north.

He succeeded in picking up a smattering of a hundred and one other subjects which might one day be useful, and Mr. Hardcastle, seeing that his pupil had in him the makings of a good seaman, did not neglect the more practical instruction. He would let the boy take an occasional trick at the wheel, so that he soon learnt to steer the ship as well as any of the crew; he taught him the points of the compass, how to lay off a course on the chart, how to make knots and splice rope, and the name and use of every rope, sail, and fitting in the ship. Much of this Billy had already

The Boy Castaways

learnt, for he had been a Boy Scout previous to the death of his father, but Mr. Hardcastle's instruction was the only part of his life he really looked forward to and enjoyed. His former interest in nautical subjects was accentuated by the more practical tuition on board ship, and thanks to the mate he made wonderful progress. True, he had little time in which to pursue his studies, but where there's a will there's a way, and by dint of borrowing and devouring with avidity all the nautical books he could lay his hands upon, he had soon amassed a store of sea lore, and had succeeded in grasping something of the intricacies of navigation.

At the time at which our story opens the *Saracen* was three days out from Hong-Kong. She had embarked a portion of her cargo at the latter place, and had been ordered to Batavia to take in still more, and thence she would proceed home to England through the Straits of Banka and round the Cape of Good Hope. So far the passage had been an exceptionally good one. It being early in the year, the north-east monsoon was blowing with steady force, and with every inch of canvas set and drawing, and with the wind on the port quarter, the barque had reeled off a steady two hundred and forty miles a day, until even Captain Wedderburn was pleased at her rapid progress. Ever since leaving Hong-Kong there had been beautiful days, with a brilliant sun and a clear blue sky streaked with the white mare's-tail clouds which showed that the wind would hold. The sea was in the same direction as the wind, but on her south-by-west course the good ship hardly felt it, and except for an occasional lazy roll, bowled along over the crisp sparkling waves as steady as a church, to put it nautically.

Everyone on board felt their spirits rising at the prospect of a speedy passage home, and Billy, for once, was really glad to be at sea. During the day the captain's temper

had improved, and, forgetting his outburst of the morning, he even condescended to address a civil word or two to the boy as the latter waited on him at the saloon table.

After finishing the washing up of the plates and dishes used for the midday meal, Billy leant over the bulwarks watching the rise and fall of the waves. From horizon to horizon the ocean was a wonderful liquid sapphire blue, streaked with milky-white foam by the breaking crests of the seas. Here and there, where the shadows fell in the curving hollows, and where the sunlight shone through the arched surfaces of the breakers, the water momentarily assumed a deep indigo-purple or a vivid emerald-green; while the light, filtering through the whiffs of wind-flung spray, imparted to them all the gorgeous opalescent colouring of a rainbow. There was something majestic in the way the moving hillocks advanced upon the ship in regular order until they seemed to overbalance and topple over in smothers of frothy spume and flying spray, and the glory and infinite gradation of their colouring fascinated the boy. He felt he was watching something entirely unspoilt by the work of men's hands, and in doing so he seemed to be cut off from the cares and worries of the world—as if, for a brief interval of time, he was alone in the presence of the Supreme Being who had created the sea.

Even the ship herself, with the shadows dancing and the sunlight playing on the wind-curved surfaces of her sails, and her sharp prow flinging up two little cascades of spray as she rushed through the water, appeared a thing of beauty. Anybody who has been at sea in a sailing ship under such conditions can well understand Billy's sensations and thoughts; but though he would willingly have spent hours watching the play of the water, his reverie was rudely interrupted by the arrival of the steward.

"Come on, me son," remarked that worthy, with a

certain gruff kindness in his tone, "I can't let ye go star-gazin' all day. There's plenty o' work ter be done in th' galley, an' there's the pertaters fur supper as wants peelin' an' washin'."

With these and other equally uninteresting occupations Billy was hard at work the whole afternoon. At four o'clock, when he had to go aft to the saloon with the officers' tea, he noticed that the weather had changed. Two hours before, when he had last been on deck, the sun had been shining, but now heavy masses of leaden cloud, flung down from a dense mass banked up on the horizon, were momentarily obscuring the blue of the sky. The wind had also risen, and howled dismally through the rigging, and from the look of it, it appeared as if a storm was brewing. The boy noticed that the captain was walking up and down the poop with one eye cocked to windward and the other on the sails, and it was obvious that he too expected a change in the weather.

"What d'ye think of it?" Billy heard him ask Mr. Hardcastle, whose watch it was.

"Wind's getting up every minute," that officer replied, "and I don't like the look o' the clouds. Look at all that wrack flying about up to wind'ard, sir." He waved his hand overhead and towards the horizon as he spoke.

"Yes," growled the skipper in a disgusted voice, for he did not like the idea of having to shorten sail, "I'm afraid we're in for a bit of a blow. The glass has gone down too."

By six o'clock it was blowing still harder, and the *Saracen* was humming through the water with whiffs of spray rattling on board like volleys of small shot. The sky had become overcast, and not a vestige of blue could be seen, its whole expanse being obscured in a leaden-grey pall, across which scattered bunches of ragged-looking white cloud were flung to leeward on the wings of the wind.

The sea, too, had lost its beautiful colour, and had become transformed into a grey-green heaving expanse, while the curling tops of the breakers no longer looked wonderful, but ugly, threatening, and dangerous. Before very long two men had to be stationed at the wheel, and even their combined strength made it difficult to steer, for the vessel had begun to pitch and yaw heavily.

Captain Wedderburn looked aloft with anxious eyes, for the sails were strained taut, while every now and then the violent squalls, leaping down from windward, threatened to tear them from their bolt-ropes and split them to ribbons. He did not wish to shorten sail before it was absolutely necessary, but he realized that the time had come, and soon afterwards Billy, who was standing on deck outside the galley, saw him make a remark to the mate. The officer nodded, and advancing to the poop rail funnelled his hands to make his voice heard.

“Shorten sail to tops’ls!” he bellowed at the pitch of his lungs. The watch had been expecting the order, and hardly were the words out of his mouth when they were clambering aloft. Before long they were laying out on the yards high above the reeling deck, and with much shouting and din, for the halyards had been let go, ropes were slatting in all directions, and the royals and topgallant sails were backing and filling against the masts with a noise like thunder, the seamen set about their work. They had a difficult job, for besides the violent motion of the ship the slender masts were bending like fishing rods with the force of the blast, while the yards, no longer held rigid by their filled canvas, swung to and fro and threatened to hurl the men from their insecure and dangerous hold. Billy was fascinated by the sight, for it always appeared to him to be absolutely wonderful how the men managed to balance themselves on the violently oscillating yards and still do their work. They were used to it, however, and at length

The Boy Castaways

after a hard tussle the work was done, and the moment the light canvas had been furled and the gaskets passed, the movement of the ship became easier.

By eight o'clock the wind had increased until it was blowing a full gale, while the sea had got up until the *Saracen* was plunging her bows under every time she pitched, and was taking in heavy masses of broken water amidships. The barometer had fallen to an alarming degree, and as it was obvious that they were in for a dirty night, the hands were called, and the ship was made snug by being put under double-reefed topsails and storm jib.

The night came down with tropical suddenness, and the heavy cloud masses obscuring the sky made it as black as pitch. Nothing could be seen except the phosphorescent glow of the white tops of the seas as they rushed by, and Billy was pleased enough when his day's work was done and he was at liberty to turn in in the stuffy deckhouse, for the reeling and pitching of the ship had again become very violent. Wedging himself in his bunk he lay awake for some time listening to the howling of the wind and the crashing of the seas as they came on board, but at length he fell asleep, and while he dreamt of home, the *Saracen* drove her way southward—southward to where an iron-shod reef awaited her coming.

CHAPTER II

The Wreck of the “Saracen”

How the disaster actually happened Billy never discovered; but he was suddenly awakened from a deep sleep by loud shouting and the trampling of sea-booted feet on the deck outside. He thought for a moment that the watch were merely putting the ship about on to the other tack, and was just going to roll over and go to sleep again when he felt a shuddering jar, and a terrifying muffled ripping sound, as if the vessel was tearing her bottom out on some obstruction far below the water line.

The shock awoke both the steward and the cook, who, calling out to Billy, leapt out of their bunks and made for the door. The boy followed, for something serious had evidently happened, and after what seemed an eternity—the interior of the deckhouse was as black as pitch, while the ship had heeled over until the floor was at an angle of forty-five degrees—the door was at length forced open. The ship seemed to be sliding bodily to leeward, bumping and grinding as she went; but just as the three passed out on to the deck this movement ceased abruptly, and the air was instantly filled with an ear-splitting babel of sound.

The canvas aloft thundered in the wind, while men shouted and loose ropes slatted against the masts and deck. The gale howled and shrieked through the rigging, but above all this uproar could be heard the crashing of

the seas as they leapt upon and broke on board the now stationary ship. The air was now full of wind-flung spray, and Billy lost sight of the cook and steward almost at once, as, holding on to the main rigging, for the vessel was shaking violently as she pounded on the reef, he looked round for the best means of saving himself. On the poop in the dim half-light, for the dawn was evidently approaching, he saw several figures crouched round the now useless wheel. As he watched, a gigantic breaker suddenly raised its foaming head high over the stern, and a moment later it fell with a roar and a deluge of water.

When he looked again the figures had vanished, swept away by the terrific force of the liquid avalanche, while the poop itself was splintered and torn until it was unrecognizable, for the wheel, hatchways, and fittings had been hurled overboard. Glancing forward, the boy noticed the foremast swaying to and fro with each lurch of the ship, while in the rigging he could distinguish the black figures of several of the men, who had evidently climbed aloft for safety. The shrouds to which they clung alternately tautened like harp strings and slackened until they fell in bights, and one by one the poor wretches vanished, flicked off into the air as if from a gigantic catapult. At last all the figures had been hurled from their insecure hold, and the mast gathered more and more inomentum until, with a terrible crash, it suddenly broke off short close to the deck and fell over the side to leeward. A moment later the mainmast, no longer supported from forward, began to reel to and fro, while blocks, yards, and other fittings were wrenched from aloft and fell on to the deck with a series of loud crashes. Billy sprang clear—and just in time; for hardly had he done so when the wire shrouds parted one by one with the terrific strain, and the massive spar fell over to port, crushing the bulwarks to matchwood and tearing a gaping hole in the deck.

A moment later an enormous sea rose vertically in the air above the boy's head as he clung to the bulwarks. He saw it coming, and started to run forward to avoid it, but the decks were slippery and wet, and were inclined at a dangerous angle, and tripping over a slack rope he fell headlong. The wall of water hung for an instant, and then fell with a crashing and rending of timber, and before he knew what had happened Billy had been plucked up in its mighty grasp and was hurled across the deck. Flung down the slope, he was dashed against something hard and unyielding with a shock which seemed to bruise every bone in his body, while a horrible burning pain made itself felt in his left leg. Then something appeared to give way, and, fighting for breath, he felt himself falling, falling, until he struck the water. Down and down he went until his lungs were bursting, and just as he had made up his mind that he was going to be drowned he felt a loose end of rope rasping across his arms. He clutched it with all his might, more by instinct than with any idea that it would save him; and though the friction tore the skin off the palms of his hands, it appeared to check his downward progress, for he suddenly came to the surface with a rapid upward rush. Breathing the air, he felt revived, and hauling in on the rope hand over hand he found one end of it attached to or entangled round a massive floating spar. The pain in his leg was excruciating, while his whole body was numb, but exerting all his strength he clung to the welcome support, and succeeded in lashing himself to it by passing the rope round his body and securely knotting it to the spar.

For what seemed an interminable time he was flung to and fro by the waves; but having the common sense to keep his back to the wind he found he had little difficulty in breathing, though spray was flying over him in showers and the breaking seas frequently submerged him. He felt

tolerably secure where he was, for the piece of timber would have supported twenty men, and with thankfulness in his heart to the merciful Providence which had thrown it in his way, he determined to let it take him where it would. How long he drifted like this he never knew, for his exhaustion and the pain of his leg caused him to relapse into a state of semi-insensibility. A sudden quietness, which seemed oppressive after the roar of the sea and the wild howling of the wind, eventually brought him back to his senses, and opening his smarting eyes he saw to his surprise that he was floating in smooth water. It had grown much lighter, and the waves had gone down as if by magic. At first the boy could not account for it, for glancing overhead he noticed that although the sky had cleared, the storm clouds still hurled their mad way across the heavens. But there was only a gentle breeze rippling the water in the spot where he lay lashed to his spar, and then for the first time, and with a feeling of supreme joy, he realized what had occurred.

The spar had drifted on until it had carried him under the lee of land, and looking round he saw on his left, only two hundred yards away, a bleak promontory whose low cliffs descended in sheer declivities to the water's edge. Ahead of him lay a sandy beach, behind which the land rose until it became blurred and indistinct in mist, while to the right he saw a long sandy spit on which the waves broke with appalling fury. He had drifted into a cove, and stretching his feet downwards he felt for the bottom. At first there were no signs of it, but after a short interval he felt his bare toes scraping over sand. An instant later he was standing on the bottom with his head out of water, while the spar gradually advanced and dragged him towards the beach. Unlashing himself he held on to it until the water reached no higher than his waist, and then, relinquishing his hold and half hopping,

half walking, for his injured limb gave him great pain, he staggered forward until he felt something warm and dry trickling through his toes. He looked down, to find himself standing on dry land, and tottering on for perhaps twenty paces he fell on his knees. He endeavoured to rise, but his strength was spent, and with a sigh of relief he dropped face downwards in the soft, warm luxury of the sand. With the soothing musical tinkle of the water in his ears he lay with his head pillow'd on his arms; and then, as the first signs of the rising sun appeared as a broad band of gorgeous orange and rose pink in the eastern horizon, Billy Martin dropped off into that merciful oblivion which only comes of utter physical exhaustion.

CHAPTER III

Cast on an Island

THE sun was high in the heavens when the boy awoke, and from its position he judged he must have lain insensible for several hours, for the day was now well advanced. The tide had also risen, and it was the cold feeling of a ripple of water breaking over his bare feet which had aroused him. Even as he rolled over, another wave, larger than its fellows, broke on the beach with a splash and a splutter and deluged him up to the knees, and, sitting up, he tried to rise. The movement, however, brought him a twinge of pain, and then the events of the early morning flew back to his brain. His body felt sore and bruised all over, while his leg was painful, swollen, and discoloured, though on feeling it he was able to make certain that no bones had been broken.

After one or two attempts he succeeded in standing, and thereupon hobbled a few paces inland. He found he could put his injured leg to the ground, though the effort hurt him horribly, so, gritting his teeth with the pain, he retreated out of reach of the incoming tide and sat down and looked about him.

Every sign of the storm had passed, and a brilliant sun shone in a blaze of light. Detached masses of cumulus cloud, their upper rounded edges clearly outlined against the pure turquoise of the sky, and their under-surfaces tinged here and there with pale lilac shadows, drifted

majestically across the heavens. Their movement showed that there was a certain amount of breeze in the upper strata of the atmosphere, but down below, on the earth's surface, there was hardly a breath of wind to mitigate the heat of the sun, and the water in the little cove, save where the advancing ripples cast lines of dark olive-coloured shadow on its shining surface, presented an expanse of shimmering light. Immediately in front of the boy, on the other side of the cove, and about six hundred yards from where he sat, a point of land, fringed with low grey cliffs descending abruptly towards the water's edge, jutted out into the calm sea. Above the cliffs the rising land was covered with coarse green vegetation, with here and there a few stunted trees and bushes, while a little to the right of this, and nearer to Billy, was a thick wooded patch extending almost to the edge of the beach. The vivid greens of its palms and trees formed a beautiful splash of colour, while behind this oasis the ground rose until it culminated in a peak about three hundred feet high. The descent from its barren summit towards the promontory was gradual, but its nearer face was more precipitous, and fell steeply down towards the banks of a small stream whose waters debouched into the head of the cove not far from where Billy sat.

Beyond the cape facing him, and stretching for fully half a mile seaward, he could see a line of disturbed swirling water, with here and there a black fang of foam-encircled rock showing above the surface. It was the reef on which the *Saracen* had struck, for he saw her black hull about two-thirds of the way out. She was a sorry-looking object, for she lay on her bilge with her bows pointing shoreward and the starboard rail under water, while no signs of life were visible on board. Of the three masts only the mizzen, which itself had been shorn of its top-mast, was left standing, and what he could see of the hull

The Boy Castaways

had been battered out of all recognition, while the greater portion of the length of the port bulwarks had vanished. She was heeled over so that the water lapped halfway up the deck, the planking of which was torn in all directions, while the deckhouses and other erections had completely disappeared. The bowsprit was still intact, and pointed dismally in the air; but much of the wreckage of the masts and yards hurled from aloft still floated alongside, attached to the hull by the rigging. Still, battered and forlorn-looking as she was, the boy was glad to see her, for from the ship he would probably be able to procure food and the necessary stores and implements for the building of a hut, if his sojourn on the island was to be a long one.

Looking along the line of beach to his left to where, about eight hundred yards off, it dipped gradually into the sea, he saw the shore was littered with a heterogeneous collection of debris. Spars of all shapes and sizes, wooden cases, planks, sails, portions of timber wrenched from the deck, hull, and bulwarks, and a hundred and one other objects barely recognizable as portions of a once fine ship, covered the foreshore. Some of the cast-up wreckage was in pieces no larger than firewood, which told plainly of the terrible pounding it had received; while other portions, including the spars, had been washed ashore intact, and with much of the rigging still attached. Mixed up in some of the debris Billy saw a white boat which had been flung bottom upwards on the sand, and getting up he went towards it to investigate. It was the *Saracen*'s dinghy, a small tubby boat fifteen feet long, and by some miracle or other she had come ashore practically undamaged. One or two small holes showed in the planking, and portions of the gunwale had been torn away, but beyond this she appeared to be sound, and with some canvas, nails, and wood, all of which lay ready to hand on the beach, Billy saw that he could repair her sufficiently to enable her to float. Put-

ting his hand underneath, he could feel that the oars were still lashed to the thwarts, the place in which they were usually kept when the boat was on board the ship. Of the larger boat the *Saracen* had carried stowed on top of the deckhouse there were no signs, neither could he see any planking which might have formed part of her.

Hobbling on along the water's edge he came across the bodies of seven of the crew entangled in the wreckage. Several had lashed themselves to spars, and the majority had sustained severe injuries; and sick at heart at the horrible sight, the boy examined the still figures for any signs of animation. It soon became obvious, however, that they were beyond all human assistance, and leaving them behind he set off along the shore to continue his search. The beach was literally covered with things, but here and there in the varied collection were cases which looked as if they might contain tinned provisions. The *Saracen* had been carrying a general cargo of British-made goods from Hong-Kong to Batavia, and when Billy's eyes lit on a large wooden case whose stencilled sides proclaimed it to contain "Rich Mixed Biscuits" he could not help smiling. The idea of living on sweet biscuits on a probably uninhabited island was ludicrous, but here at any rate was enough food to keep him going for a considerable time, and he blessed the firm for their toothsome products.

About a hundred yards farther on there was a small dip in the beach, and coming to its edge the boy saw it contained two more prone figures. The first was that of the steward, and going up to him he examined the body for any signs of life; but a brief survey told him what to expect, for the glassy staring eyes, a horrible gash in the head, and the painfully cold hands and feet told their own terrible tale. The other body was that of the second mate, but he too, poor man, was past caring for, and it

The Boy Castaways

was obvious that although both he and the steward had retained sufficient strength to crawl ashore, for they lay well above high-water mark, they had only done so to die of their injuries.

Advancing another fifty yards he came upon a third figure lying face downwards in the sand and clad in what remained of a pair of pyjamas. The garments looked familiar, and turning the body over, Billy saw it was that of Roger Wedderburn. Noticing at once that the cheeks were not of the same awful pallor as those of the two dead men he had just left, he placed his hand on the other boy's breast, to feel for signs of the heart beating. To his surprise and joy he felt the regular throbbing almost at once, while the steady rise and fall of the chest showed that Roger was fast asleep. There were no signs of injury of any kind, and overjoyed at the thought of having a companion to share his solitude, even if it was his arch-enemy, he shook him by the arm.

"Wake up!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

"Eh, what's that?" mumbled the other sleepily, half opening his eyes and then shutting them again. "Go away, it's not time to turn out yet!"

Billy shook still harder, and then at last Roger opened his eyes and sat up. For a full minute he sat speechless, gazing round about in amazement, for as yet he had not remembered the events of the early morning.

"Crikey!" he eventually exclaimed. "What on earth's happened? How the dickens did I get——?" The look on his face suddenly changed. "I remember now," he said, piecing the story together in his mind. "I heard a crash and came on deck, and the next thing I remember, I was in the water. What's become of all the others—where's my father?"

"I haven't seen the captain," replied Billy quietly.

"Father's drowned!" Roger cried. "I know he's

drowned. I remember now," he continued, his voice quavering, "he was on the poop when I came up. Oh!—" He broke down and burst into tears.

"He may have got away in the boat with some of the others," Billy suggested, though he well knew the improbability of such a thing. "The dinghy's been washed ashore, but there are no signs of the other boat, and she's not on board the ship." He waved his hand towards where the *Saracen* lay on the reef.

"But supposing he hasn't," moaned Roger between his sobs. "Suppose he's been drowned, suppose we're left here alone—" I know it makes no difference to you," he suddenly burst out in rage. "I know you don't care what's happened to him, I—" His feelings overcame him, and the tears streamed down his face.

After this uncalled-for and wholly unjust outbreak of temper—for Billy had only been trying to console him—Roger rocked himself to and fro in a paroxysm of grief, in which the other boy thought it wise not to interfere. He felt angry and sore that he should have such thoughts imputed to him, and all but made up his mind to leave the other to fend for himself. He was getting to his feet with the idea of going away when he saw Roger looking at him.

"When you're in a better temper, Roger Wedderburn," he remarked, "you can come and tell me so. I'm not going—"

"Oh, d-d-don't go, don't leave me!" interrupted the other tearfully. "I know I was a—b-b-beast to say what I did."

"Cheer up, man!" Billy said, forgiving him and going nearer. "For goodness' sake don't let's get coming to blows over nothing. There's quite a good chance of Captain Wedderburn having got away in the boat, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he got picked up all right. Cheer up! It'll never do to go on like this!"

"Have any of the others come ashore?"

"Nine have been washed up on the beach," answered Billy, who saw no use in concealing the fact, "and they're all dead. Captain Wedderburn isn't amongst them, though."

"Honour bright?" asked Roger.

"Of course; you can go and see for yourself if you like."

"What are we to do then?" Roger queried, still sobbing, but with a more cheerful face.

"Well, I vote we see if we can find something to eat and drink. I know I'm jolly hungry and thirsty, and all sorts of cases have been washed ashore, and one of 'em's got biscuits in it, mixed biscuits, for I saw it marked on the sides."

"Sounds good, but what about water? That's far more important."

"There's a stream of sorts along the beach there," answered Billy, "and I vote we go and see if it's fresh."

"Not a bad idea," agreed the other, getting up. "Hallo!" he added, noticing his companion's injury for the first time. "You've got a beastly-looking leg. How'd you do it?"

"I got a bit of a crack when I was washed overboard."

"Well, come on then," said Roger cheerfully. "Hang on to my arm. We'll go and have a look for those biscuits of yours. It's lucky one of us is sound. I'm only feeling a bit stiff."

For the first time in his life Billy ceased to have any antipathy towards Roger, and putting his arm on the other's shoulder they set off together along the beach, and, passing the corpses of the drowned men with their eyes averted, came to the spot where the debris lay thickest.

"Here's the case of biscuits," remarked Billy, stopping before it. "If we can find something to open it with we'd better take some along with us." They dragged the box free

of the litter, and with the aid of a large stone, used as a hammer, and a wedge-shaped piece of wood the lid was soon prised off. The biscuits were packed in small air-tight tins, and tearing the lid off one and removing the inner covering of thin tin, the boys saw the contents were in excellent condition. Taking a box each they set off towards the stream, and arriving at the spot where, in a small grove of coconut palms, its limpid waters ran into the head of the bay, they ascertained it was fresh, and lying full length on the bank drank to their hearts' content. The cool draught seemed to put new life into them, and sitting down they were soon busy eating.

"By gum, they're good!" mumbled Roger, with his mouth full. "I never knew how jolly hungry I was!"

"Nor did I," replied the other, looking at the rapidly diminishing contents of his tin; "we're making regular beasts of ourselves!"

For some minutes they were too busy munching to talk, but at length Billy put down his empty tin and sat up with a sigh.

"Thank goodness," he remarked, "we've got something decent to eat. It would have been pretty rotten if we'd been washed ashore with nothing!"

"Great Scott, yes!" Roger agreed. "I don't fancy limpets and coconuts and rotten things of that kind, though I have heard of a man who was washed ashore on a desert island and managed to keep himself alive for three months until he was picked up. By the way," he went on, "I wonder if there's any chance of our being rescued?"

"Can't say in the least, for I don't know if we're in the track of ships. This island's somewhere between Hong-Kong and Batavia, and that's about all we know for certain."

"It doesn't appear to be inhabited even," continued the other, looking about him.

"Just as well for us it isn't, perhaps. If there were people living here they'd be savages of sorts, and all they'd care about would be sneaking stuff from the wreck. No," he added, "I hope it isn't inhabited."

"Well, what d'you think we'd better do first?"

"I vote we repair the dinghy to start with," Billy suggested, "for we must get what we want from the ship as soon as we can. She looks pretty groggy now, and if it comes on to blow she might go to pieces and leave us with nothing but what's on the beach. If we're to be here for long we'll have to build a shed or hut of sorts, and we must have tools to do it, so we'd better get what we want at once."

"Right you are!" the other agreed. "What about starting now and getting the boat launched? I see she's high and dry."

They determined to do this, and retraced their steps along the beach to where the dinghy lay; and while Roger extracted the nails from the lid of the packing case containing the biscuits, Billy cut some strips of canvas off the remains of a sail which lay on the shore. He had great difficulty in doing this, for neither of them had knives, but by dint of hacking at the tough material with sharp stones and the edge of a biscuit tin, he eventually succeeded in cutting off as much as he required. He then folded the strips of canvas over and over to make pads large enough to cover the holes in the bottom of the boat, and nailed strips of wood from the packing case over each one. By the time the job was finished it looked anything but tidy, but at any rate it would keep the inflow of water down to a small trickle which would not endanger the dinghy, and which could easily be kept under if one of them baled while the other pulled. More satisfactory and lasting repairs could be made when the necessary tools and materials had been procured from the wreck. The holes mended, they turned

the boat over till she lay on her keel, and then, placing the oars on the beach underneath her to act as rollers, they endeavoured to push her down into the water. She was a heavy, stoutly-built craft, however, and their united efforts would not budge her.

"We'll never move the blessed thing!" exclaimed Roger, wiping his streaming face; "she's a jolly sight too heavy for us!"

"Let's have one more try," Billy panted. "We must get her afloat somehow."

Once more they put their shoulders to the gunwale.

"One, two, three—— Heave!"

They pushed and pushed for all they were worth, but still there were no signs of movement, and both the boys stood up and looked at each other, wondering what to do next.

"What an ass I am!" Billy suddenly cried. "Of course I know of a way to launch her. I've seen fishermen do it in England with boats double the size of this one. Look here, we must both shove on one end of her and turn her right round until she's pointing the opposite way; when we've done that we shove on the other end. It's quite easy, and I vote we try it."

No sooner said than done, and after a short tussle the boat was slid down the beach crab fashion, and before very long lay afloat with the ripples slapping up against her white planking. To Billy's delight his temporary patches served their purpose, for the water only came in in a dribble, which he was easily able to keep under by baling with a biscuit tin, and with Roger pulling at the sculls the dinghy proceeded towards the ledge of rock on which the *Saracen* lay.

The tide had turned and was now going down, and more of the ship was visible than when Billy had first seen her; and on getting closer, the boys noticed that her bows were immovably fixed between two large masses of rock, while

throughout her whole length she was supported on the reef. The latter, however, sloped to seaward, and the bows of the wreck were high in the air, while her stern was almost under water. She had been driven ashore at half-tide, and the force of the waves must have lifted her bodily up and flung her down in her present position.

Large quantities of wreckage, intermingled with broken spars, tangled cordage, and the remains of sails, littered the reef and floated in the shallow water alongside the vessel; and seeing that they would have a difficult job to get on board by the bows, for Billy's injured leg made climbing impossible for him, the boys pulled round the rocks and approached the *Saracen*'s starboard quarter, which was almost level with the water. On getting alongside, Roger shipped the oars and made the boat's painter fast to the mizzen chains, and, giving Billy a helping hand, both boys were soon standing on the poop.

The ship was hardly recognizable as her former trim self, for the teak deck was torn up and strained in all directions, while in several places the fall of the masts had wrought great havoc, great rents having been opened up in the once smooth planking and the greater portion of the bulwarks having been demolished. The only signs of the deckhouses amidships were a few twisted steel rods and one or two splintered wooden stanchions, and in the midst of a chaotic jumble of broken timber and tangled rigging, the jagged stumps of the broken fore- and mainmasts pointed forlornly in the air. On the poop the damage was also very noticeable, for skylights, wheel, and compass had been wrenched from their fastenings and hurled overboard, while the deck there had also been badly strained.

The vessel had a heavy list to starboard, so that the rail amidships was under water, and the sea lapped some distance up the sloping deck. Climbing down from the poop, the boys opened the door leading to the officers'

quarters in the stern. The cuddy presented a terrible scene of desolation, for chairs and tables had been torn from their fastenings and lay in a splintered heap, while the water descending through the skylight had drenched everything, until the once shining brasswork was dull, and the brightly-coloured strip of a carpet a sodden black mass.

Opening the doors of the cabins the starboard side of the saloon they saw the dark water lapping halfway up the chests of drawers underneath the bunks, and as all the contents of the latter would be soaked with wet and comparatively useless, they climbed up the sloping floor and went into those on the other side. There were three of them, the after one having been occupied by the captain, the next by Roger, and the third by Mr. Hardcastle, and though from their condition it was evident that they had been flooded, the water had drained away when the ship had heeled over after striking. The drawers under the bunks had all fallen out at the same instant, and their contents lay on the floors in a sodden and unrecognizable jumble of garments. Picking out a shirt from the litter on the floor of his cabin, Roger looked at it in disgust.

"What had we better take ashore with us?" he asked.

"Take some of your clothes if you want 'em," said the other, laughing at the expression on Roger's face. "They look a bit damp, but they'll dry in the sun. Then we'd better find some tools, cooking things, and tinned food. Half a mo', though, I nearly forgot! We'd better look round for a couple of knives and some matches. That'll do for the present, and we can come back later for anything else."

"I know where we'll find matches," said Roger. "Father used to keep a whole lot in a tin box in one of his drawers. I'll go and look for 'em."

He left the cabin, and Billy heard him rummaging next door.

"Here we are!" he said when he returned. "I've got several packets. They're a bit damp, but I dare say they'll dry in the sun. I've brought along Father's telescope and binoculars as well. I thought we could light a fire with one of the glasses if necessary."

"Good man!" cried Billy, surprised at the other's fore-thought. "Now I'll go and loot the carpenter's shop—lucky he lived forward and not in the deckhouse or we shouldn't find a thing—and then I'll see what cooking gear I can get hold of. While I'm doing that, you might get up some tinned stuff from that place below there"—he pointed to the hatch of the small provision room which was situated underneath the cuddy—"and anything else you think may be useful. Put what you collect on the poop, so we can shove it into the boat."

"Right you are!" said Roger, who, strangely enough, did not appear to resent being ordered about by the former cabin-boy. "Give us a yell if you want any help."

Both boys went off on their respective errands, and while Roger ransacked the provision room his companion made his way forward along the deck towards the forecastle. The foremost portion of the ship had not been so badly damaged as the stern, and, entering the little cupboard where the carpenter had kept his belongings, he soon found what he wanted. The tools were all red with rust, but he selected a formidable-looking saw, a bag of nails, a hammer, screwdriver, screws, some sheet copper for patching the boat, a pot of tallow, a couple of cold chisels, and an axe, as being what was most urgently required. He made up his mind to take away the remaining tools on the first opportunity, and then visited the men's quarters under the forecastle, in search of knives. As luck would have it he soon came across three in the pockets of the oilskins hung up over their former owners' bunks, and, delighted at his good luck, he opened one of the

chests, which was lashed to the deck and had not been carried away when the ship had struck, and selected a couple of shirts and a pair of trousers. He also came across a housewife containing needles and thread and thrust it inside his shirt, and tying the things he had found in a piece of canvas went aft again and put the bundle on the poop. He then went down the ladder and entered the cuddy.

"How're you getting on?" he shouted to Roger.

"Fine!" said the other, putting his head up the hatch. "I've got hold of some corned beef, butter, jam, tinned sausages, and goodness only knows what else; the place is chock-a-block with grub!"

"That's good; and you'd better put out enough to last us for a day or two—we can fetch the rest by degrees. By the way," he continued, smitten by the sudden thought that they had no weapons of any kind, "d'you happen to know if there are any rifles on board?"

"Yes, I do," said Roger. "You know that long cupboard in Father's room?"

"Yes."

"Well, you'll find half a dozen there, ammunition too. I know they're there, because I helped to clean them. What d'you want 'em for?"

"Oh, just in case anything crops up," Billy answered. "I think we'll feel safer if we have 'em. Where's the key?" he asked, going into Captain Wedderburn's cabin.

"Hanging on the hook there—no, just by your right hand," answered Roger, with his head up the hatch. "It's the one with the label on it. Got it?"

"Yes."

Billy fitted the key into the cupboard door and opened it without difficulty, and there, neatly stowed in a rack, and swathed in greased flannel as a protection against

the damp, were six rifles, while above them on a shelf lay several boxes of ammunition.

The greater number of ships employed in the Far East carry arms for use in cases of emergency, for the Chinese are well known as pirates, and will not hesitate to massacre the crew of a helpless vessel if they are given the opportunity; and though Billy did not know this, he blessed Messrs. Flinthard, the *Saracen's* owners, for having included the six weapons in her equipment. Taking down one and unwrapping it, he saw to his joy that it was uninjured by the wet, and that, moreover, it was a brand-new Lee-Enfield .303 magazine rifle. Though he had never actually fired a similar one, he had, as a Scout, often practised with a miniature rifle, and so had a nodding acquaintance with firearms, and knew how to use them; so, taking two from the cupboard, with a box of ammunition, he relocked the door and put the key in the pocket of his trousers.

"Got 'em?" asked Roger as he reappeared.

"Yes; I'll leave 'em here for the time being. I'm going to the pantry to see what I can get hold of. How are you getting on?" he asked, looking at the pile of tins on the deck beside the hatch.

"I'll be another ten minutes or so," Roger replied. "There are a lot of unopened cases down here I haven't looked at, and we'd better leave them for another day."

"Buck up, then; I vote we get back as soon as we can. We've got a pretty good load for the dinghy already."

He went into the pantry, and though when the ship had struck all the chinaware and crockery had been flung from the racks and smashed to smithereens, he found half a dozen enamelled-tin plates, some drinking mugs, knives, forks, spoons, and, last but not least, an enormous frying pan and saucepan. Wrapping them up in a tablecloth he

put them outside the door, and re-entering the saloon found Roger had finished.

Together they carried what they had collected on to the poop, and while Roger went back for the rifles and ammunition, the other boy clambered down into the dinghy and baled out what water had accumulated in his absence.

"Are you ready for the stuff?" queried Roger when he came back.

"Yes; pass it down."

One by one the precious bundles were lowered and stowed in the boat until her gunwale was perilously near the water.

"Is that the lot?" asked Billy rather anxiously. "If there's any more we'll have to make another trip."

"That's all," said the other, shinning down into the boat, which sank deeper than ever with his extra weight. "By George!" he added, casting off the painter and shipping his oars, "I think we've done a jolly good two hours' work."

"I should think we had," agreed Billy, as the boat began to move away from the wreck.

Half an hour later saw all their newly-acquired belongings disembarked on the shore close to the stream, and the dinghy run up on the beach. The remainder of the afternoon was spent in burying the drowned men; and though for a minute or two the boys were nonplussed because they had no spade, nature came to their assistance, for walking a little way inland they came across a natural trench close to the spot where Roger had been washed ashore. We need not dwell on their ghastly task, but before sunset they had finished their work, and feeling very depressed they walked back to where they had left the stores. Sitting down on the beach neither of them spoke for several minutes, but at length Billy realized that the sun was getting very low.

"I say," he exclaimed, "we'd better buck up and rig up a shelter and light a fire. I'd no idea it was so late, and it'll be dark in another hour!"

"By Jove, yes, so it will," Roger said; "but don't you think you'd better give that leg of yours a rest, and let me make the fire and shove up a tent of sorts?"

"Oh, I'm not so bad as all that, and it feels much better now the stiffness has worn off; but if you rig up something for us to sleep in I'll light a fire and get supper ready. I wonder if those matches are dry?" for they had spread them out in the sun immediately on coming ashore. Roger took one and struck it on the box.

"Quite all right," he said as it flared up.

They retreated above high-water mark, and before long, Billy was hard at work with a piece of board scratching out a trench in the soft ground, and, having done this to his satisfaction, he banked it up at the sides with large stones and mud from the side of the stream. The open end of the trench pointed out to sea, so what little wind there was would create a draught; and then, placing a couple of flat stones across the far end, his primitive kitchen was complete. He then proceeded to chop up a packing case for fuel, and after collecting some dried grass and palm trash for kindling, put it in the trench with the wood on top of it.

Lighting a match, the dry kindling blazed up at once, but for some time the damp wood would not ignite, and did nothing but belch forth clouds of thick smoke. After renewing and relighting the dry grass several times, however, and by dint of blowing upon it until he was breathless and coughing, the wood was eventually persuaded to burn, and ten minutes later the fire was blazing merrily. Roger, meanwhile, had not been idle, for, looking round, Billy saw he had stretched a rope six feet off the ground between the trunks of two palms about eight feet apart.

Over this he had stretched a piece of sailcloth in the form of a tent, pegging down the sides with pieces of wood, and filling in the ends with more canvas; and with some of the blankets from the wreck covering the floor, the little habitation was complete. By the time he had finished his building operations Billy had opened a tin of butter and was ladling some of its contents into the frying pan.

"By gum!" he said, as the other boy came towards the fire, "that's a jolly good tent you've made; it makes me remember how tired I am."

Roger flushed with pleasure at the praise. "Jolly good fireplace you've built," he remarked; "it's going like a house on fire!"

Billy laughed. "What's it to be?" he asked, examining the labels on the tins. "Let's see; there's corned beef, sausages, ox-tail soup—that's no good in a frying pan—tinned peaches—nor are they either—a bottle of mixed pickles, something else with the label off, but which I think's corned beef, and a tin of salmon. What's it to be?"

"Sausages sound good," said Roger, smacking his lips. "I'll go and get some more biscuits."

By the time he returned the savoury smell of frying was being wafted through the trees, and before very long they were devouring their evening meal. The sun had set before they finished, and as the darkness began to fall and the stars twinkled in the velvety blue of the sky, they crept into the tent. Roger gave vent to a grunt of satisfaction as he lay down on the soft blankets.

"By gum," he murmured, "I'm jolly sleepy!"

"So am I," said Billy, yawning and following his example. "Good night!"

"Good night!"

In five minutes the castaways, lulled by the soothings of the fitful breeze in the feathery tops of the palms and

the lazy, liquid murmur of the little waves breaking on the beach, were dozing. The fire flickered and went out; the risen moon cast its silvery pathway of light across the still water of the cove, while away on the western horizon the last traces of sunlight still lingered as a narrow band of pale salmon pink against the prevailing indigo of the sky. Gradually, however, the patch of colour became more and more indistinct until it vanished completely as night came down; and though one or two frogs set up a hideous, discordant croaking in the long grass on the banks of the stream, the boys were too tired to heed it. They were both fast asleep; their first day on the island was over.

CHAPTER IV

The Island

IT was four days before Billy's leg was well enough to allow the boys to make a joint exploration of the island, and, as it was, the injured youth was lucky to get off as lightly as he did, for if he had struck and seriously damaged his knee, he might have been a month or more on his back. By some miracle, however, the leg had only been badly bruised and cut when he had been hurled against the bulwarks previous to being washed overboard, and though its painful condition would not allow him to climb hills, it did not prevent his doing less strenuous things. So the boys employed the period in procuring what other stores and provisions they required from the wreck, and in clearing up, as far as lay in their power, the debris and litter on the beach.

The articles brought from the *Saracen*, as well as those which had been washed ashore, were collected, piled up above high-water mark, and covered with tarpaulin, while what spars could be moved were carried ashore in case they might be of use later on, others being sawn and chopped up for firewood. The boys found themselves, when this work was completed, with an enormous quantity of tinned provisions of all kinds, and though all the flour in the storeroom on board the ship had been damaged by the wet until it was musty and quite unfit for use, they had sufficient ship's biscuit, stored in airtight, tin-lined cases, to

keep them for an indefinite period. In the face of such a plentiful supply they considered it inadvisable to attempt to broach the *Saracen's* cargo, much of which had already found its way ashore when the falling of the foremast had torn up the deck over one of the holds. They knew, moreover, that although some portion of the cargo consisted of British-made foodstuffs, by far the greater part of it was a consignment of tools and agricultural implements on their way from Hong-Kong to Batavia.

The dinghy was made thoroughly seaworthy, the holes in her bottom being covered with copper sheeting nailed on over several layers of well-greased flannel, while the tent was enlarged and improved. A small stove had also been found on board the ship and had been brought ashore for cooking purposes, and though they had no coal, they possessed an abundance of fuel in the broken-up timber on the beach.

They had both become accustomed to the novelty of the life on the island, and though Roger had occasional fits of depression, to Billy the existence seemed absolute bliss after that on board the ship. He had nobody to order him about, and although he had to work hard, the labour seemed much less irksome than that on board. There was also plenty of good wholesome food—food of a kind he had never tasted in the *Saracen*; and though much of it did come out of tins, the boys had manufactured fishing lines—for there were plenty of hooks on board—and caught the fish crowding in the surrounding sea. The island, too, where it was wooded, swarmed with pigeons and wild parrots, and as they had come across a shot gun and a supply of cartridges in Captain Wedderburn's cabin, they used it for procuring a supply of the birds. It is true that their marksmanship with the gun left something to be desired, but, as Billy said, the birds were "so bloomin' tame that they came and sat on the muzzle", so they could

not very well help getting as many as they wanted; and these with the fresh fish formed a welcome change to the eternal tinned food. Billy was really happy, and though at the back of his mind there was always the doubt as to whether or not they would ever be rescued, he felt somehow that everything would eventually turn out all right. He was also the leader in everything, for though Roger had developed wonderfully, and was no longer the idle boy he had been on board the ship, he came to Billy for advice on every possible subject, for the latter was essentially the practical one of the two. Roger, too, had the good sense to realize that he could not bully the ex-cabin-boy with impunity, Captain Wedderburn no longer being present to protect him; and Billy, on the other hand, was by no means inclined to be antagonistic, as he might well have been now that his former enemy was in his power, for he was far too honourably minded to take advantage of the altered state of affairs. He contented himself by secretly revelling in the thought that without his assistance and practical advice Roger would have been as helpless as a child, and that, by his behaviour, the ex-bully acknowledged him to be the leader.

The boys had really become very friendly, and had come to call each other by their Christian names, and although when Roger was seized with his periodical fits of depression he sometimes showed signs of temper, Billy solved the difficulty on such occasions by leaving him severely alone. The comparative harmony of their relations undoubtedly spelt for efficiency, for the amount of work they got through together would not have disgraced a couple of grown men.

“Hail! smiling morn, smi—i—i—ling morn!” chanted Roger cheerfully, but in a most unmusical voice, on coming into the tent early in the morning of the fifth day they had been upon the island. “What, not up yet,

The Boy Castaways

Bill!" he cried. "Come on, rouse out! I woke up ages ago and had a bathe while you were still snoring!"

"What's the time?" asked Billy sleepily, rolling over in his blankets and yawning.

"Time? I'm sure I don't know—haven't a watch. 'Bout six o'clock, though, I should say, from the sun."

Billy stretched himself and rubbed his eyes, and then proceeded to get up.

"Give us the soap," he remarked, blinking in the strong sunlight. "I'll go and wash in the stream."

"How's the leg?" asked the other, handing the cake across.

"Much better, in fact it seems quite well. D'you think we might go and explore to-day? I'm jolly keen on seeing what sort of a place this is. We don't even know for certain whether or not it's an island yet, though we have been calling it one all along!"

"Hurrah!" cried Roger, "I'm all for it. Look here, buck up and finish your bath, and I'll get on with the breakfast. What about starting directly we've finished?"

"I vote we do," said Billy over his shoulder, as he moved off towards the stream. "The fish for breakfast are hung up by the tent—I cleaned 'em last night—and you'll find the butter and frying pan in the packing case. Go easy with the butter though!"

Billy was soon splashing in the clear water to his heart's content, and when he returned ten minutes later the fish were sizzling in the pan, while Roger turned them over with a stick.

"Where's the coffee?" asked Billy, not noticing it on the stove.

"Oh blow! I forgot it."

"Never mind, we'll drink water."

Before very long the boys had finished breakfast, and washing up the plates and pans, for they had come to a

mutual arrangement that this should invariably be done immediately after meals, they set about making preparations for the expedition.

They manufactured water bottles by fitting loops of strong twine to ordinary bottles so that they could be worn over the shoulder, and both had haversacks made by themselves out of canvas in preparation for the great event. In these latter they carried some biscuits and their cartridges, for Billy proposed taking one of the rifles and Roger the shot gun, and discarding the shoes they invariably wore when working on the beach, they put on boots taken from the wreck. Both boys looked workmanlike and sturdy enough, for they wore shirts and ordinary trousers cut down into shorts, while stockings and soft felt hats, looted from the seamen's chests in the forecastle, completed their outfit.

"Half a mo'!" said Billy, diving into the tent just as they were about to set out, and reappearing with a large rolled-up Red Ensign which he proceeded to secure to his belt. "We'd better take this with us, and shove up a flagstaff on the top of the hill. We'll cut a bamboo on the way up, and then if any ships do pass they'll probably see it."

"Good idea!" said the other.

They crossed the stream and started to walk through the patch of wooded country beyond it. The sandy soil close to the beach was thickly sown with coconut and other palms, so closely spaced that their feathery tops all but shut out the blue of the sky beyond. Here and there was a dense clump of spiky-leaved bamboo, while underfoot the ground was covered with rank luxuriant grass which made progress comparatively easy. On penetrating farther, however, the palms became rarer, their place being taken by slender smooth-stemmed trees some forty to fifty feet high, bearing branches from about half their height up

to the top, while in among the glossy dark-green leaves was large yellow fruit. On advancing into this patch the boys were impeded by dense masses of bush and under-growth reaching almost above their heads, while the stubborn tendrils of the vines and creepers all but made progress impossible; and though they hacked at the tough growth with their knives, they had barely moved ten yards forward in as many minutes.

"It's no earthly use our trying to get through this lot!" exclaimed Billy, looking at the blunted edge of his knife; "it's much too thick. We'll have to go back and see if we can't get round the wood."

Roger wiped his streaming face before answering, for the sun had gathered strength and the heat under the trees was intense.

"I think we'd better," he answered; "we'll never manage it this way. Hallo!" he added a moment later, catching sight of the large yellow fruit high above his head, "I wonder if those things are good to eat? They look rather decent."

"Shouldn't try 'em if I were you," replied Billy; "they might be poisonous."

"There's a book in Father's cabin with pictures of trees and palms and things in it," continued Roger; "he used to be rather keen on that sort of thing. I think I'll go off this evening and get it: it may help us to find out what some of these things are, and if the fruit is fit to eat."

"Right you are! but don't try any experiments until we're quite certain. I know those are coconuts, of course," said Billy, pointing to a palm with numbers of the round green globes containing the nuts clustered below the feathery top; "but though I could tell you the name of any English tree at once, I'm blowed if I can place any of these. Well, we'd better go back now, or else we'll never get to the top of the hill!"

They retraced their footsteps until they came to the clearer ground, and then, leaving the wood on their right, set off towards the promontory which Billy had first noticed on being washed ashore. On arriving at the spot where the sandy beach gave way to the low cliffs they struck inland, and circling the thicker part of the wood soon came to open country. From where they stood a grassy slope led to the sharp conical summit of the hill; here and there on its surface there were patches of dense dark-green undergrowth, while in other places the turf seemed to have been washed away until the bare rocky substratum showed grey against the prevailing green. On the whole, however, the ascent seemed comparatively easy, and pausing a moment to cut a bamboo from a neighbouring clump, the boys began their climb.

They soon arrived at the steeper portion of the slope near the top of the hill, and after five minutes' hard work succeeded in scrambling over the line of loose boulders lying just below the summit. They were rather scant of breath on reaching the small grass-grown plateau which formed the hilltop, and flinging themselves on the ground rested for a minute before looking round them.

Billy was the first to recover.

"By gum," he ejaculated, "it's worth the climb!"

The view certainly was magnificent, and as the hill was the highest point in the land, the whole area of their little domain lay spread out before them like a panorama. A reference to the map, a drawing of the island as shown on the chart subsequently produced by the Admiralty, will give a better idea of the land than a worded description, while upon it are marked the names afterwards given to the various features by the boys themselves.

It will be noticed that the island was divided into two distinct portions by the stream flowing into the cove in which the boys had been washed ashore, and subsequently

The Boy Castaways

called Salvation Bay. That part of the land lying to the eastward—for Billy had a rough idea of the points of the compass from noting the direction in which the sun rose and set—consisted of comparatively high land culminating in the sharp conical pointed hill on which they sat, while its sea face was low grey cliff. Lying off the eastern coast were two distinct masses of rock, that to the southward, roughly circular in shape, and with its summit covered in vegetation, being called Evans Island, after the second mate of the *Saracen*.

Slightly to the northward of this were two sharp pinnacle rocks standing fully fifty feet above the water. They looked like twin church spires with their bases just separated by a narrow channel, while their dark-grey corrugated sides were destitute of all greenery. Their extraordinary shape made them a distinct and most conspicuous feature of the coast, and for a reason which will appear later they were called the “Hare’s Ears”, and they certainly did bear some resemblance to the upstanding ears of that animal. The western half of the island was formed of low, slightly undulating sandy country covered here and there with patches of thick scrub, with occasional clumps of coconut palms standing near high-water mark.

Towards all points of the compass except the westward, the hill on the top of which the boys sat descended more or less gradually to the coast; but in the above-named direction alone its sides, composed of dark-grey rock, covered here and there with patches of the inevitable scrub, turf, and a few stunted trees, fell abruptly, almost precipitously, towards the shallow gully through which the stream pursued its winding way seawards. The banks of this natural valley were covered with dense masses of vivid green under-growth, through which a shining ribbon of light denoted the presence of the running water.

Small as the island was, for it seemed to be about one

and a half miles long by the same distance across, the prospect it afforded was beautiful, for the endless variety of the greens in its woods and clumps of growth, and the dazzling whites and yellows of its beaches and bare spots made it look like a gigantic parti-coloured jewel set in the midst of a broad expanse of sapphire-coloured velvet.

Roger opened his mouth wide with astonishment and gazed round him for several minutes without speaking.

"It does look ripping!" he exclaimed at length.

"Yes," agreed Billy, who was also fascinated by the prospect, "I'm jolly glad we were wrecked on a place like this. Just fancy what it would have been like to have been stuck on an island with nothing but rock and sand! By George, Roger," he continued, "we've got a jolly lot to be thankful for!"

"I should blooming well think we had; but the place doesn't appear to have anyone on it bar ourselves, and there's no other land in sight, either."

Billy stood up, and, shading his eyes, looked all round the horizon. Nothing met his gaze except the rigid line of demarcation betwixt the shining sapphire-blue sea and the pale turquoise of the sky, with here and there masses of cumulus cloud floating motionless in the still air.

"Not a blessed thing in sight!" he remarked rather disappointedly, straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of the dim purple shadow which would betoken the presence of neighbouring islands, and eager to discern the feather of smoke from the funnel of some passing steamer, or the gleam of white of a distant sail. "Not a thing in sight!" he added; "we're quite isolated."

Roger looked rather unhappy at this announcement.

"After all," went on Billy, noticing the look on his face, "it is rather a good thing in a way that the island is by itself. You see," he remarked with a certain amount of truth and common sense, "this hill must be conspicuous

from the sea, and as we must be somewhere near the track of ships going from Hong-Kong to Batavia, it's much more likely that one island will attract their attention than if a whole lot of 'em were clustered together. D'you see what I mean?"

Roger nodded. "Yes, I see that," he began, "but suppose we——"

"My dear chap, we're bound to be picked up sooner or later, so for goodness' sake cheer up. We'll shove the flag up, and it's not every day that people hoist Red Ensigns on uninhabited islands; so if any passing ship does see it you can bet your bottom dollar they'll come along to see what's up."

He took the ensign and lashed it to the bamboo with the Union Jack down, for he knew this to be a recognized signal of distress, and sharpening one end of the bamboo he drove it firmly into the ground and propped it up with one or two large stones. The flag itself hung listlessly in the air, for there was little or no wind, but its brilliant red folds made a patch of dazzling colour against the blue of the sky, which would probably attract the attention of any passing vessel.

"That'll do until we can rig up something a little more permanent," announced Billy triumphantly, for he was rather proud of his handiwork. "It would be a jolly good thing," he continued, "if we could build a bonfire. We could set it alight if we saw anything, and the smoke would be bound to attract 'em."

"But we should have to drag all the wood and stuff up here from the beach," said Roger, "and that would be pretty tough work."

"Yes, perhaps it's not worth while after all," agreed the other after a moment's thought.

"How'd it be," asked Roger, "to build a tent or hut up here, and then if savages did come they couldn't possibly

get at us, for this hill commands the whole island, and we could make it hot for 'em if we had the rifles?"

"I don't know about living up here for good and all, for it would mean having to bring all the food and stuff up; and besides, it's too far away from the water, and we can't get on without that. No, I know what we'll do," Billy went on; "we'll make a bonfire on the sand by the spit to the left of the stream. It'll be no trouble to get wood there, for there's plenty all over the beach, and then I vote we build a decent hut somewhere close. The tent's all right in weather like this, but if it comes on to rain we'll jolly soon be flooded out."

After some further discussion they decided to do this, and having rested for an hour or so on the hilltop, started off down the southern slope of the hill with the idea of making for home along the bed of the stream. The descent was accomplished without incident, and reaching the coast they struck to the left until they came to the little indentation marked on the map as Saracen Cove. By the time they reached it the sun was intensely hot, and as they were both rather warm after their exertions they took off their clothes and bathed from the sandy beach. The water was delightfully cool after the heat, and refreshed by their swim they sat down in the shade and ate some of their biscuits.

They did not delay very long, for they were anxious to continue the exploration of the island, and within a quarter of an hour they were once more under way, and striking inland made towards the foot of the hill. After half an hour's hard work, for in places the scrub was very thick, and they were forced to make wide detours to avoid it, they eventually came to the water. The stream apparently had its source some distance up the hillside, for they could see it gushing out of a fissure in the wall of rock, and from it fell in a cascade into a small deep pool, which in turn found an outlet into the natural gully leading to Salvation

Bay. Both banks of the stream were covered with dense scrub, and seeing that it was useless to endeavour to force their way through this, the boys dismissed the idea and commenced to wade along its bed, for the water was quite shallow. In places it fell over smooth water-worn boulders in miniature waterfalls, but by far the greater portion of its bottom was comparatively hard level sand, with here and there beds of large round different-coloured pebbles smoothed by the action of the water. Though there were occasional deep holes near the banks the boys, thanks to the clearness of the water, were able to see and avoid them without difficulty; and scrambling along, with the water usually up to their knees, but here and there waist deep, they made rapid progress.

As they advanced, the banks of the stream became more and more smothered with thick masses of creepers, vines, ferns, and low-growing bush, while in some places the foliage of the tall bamboos growing near the water's edge met overhead until the bright sunlight became obscured. Here they were rather annoyed by the unwelcome attentions of swarms of mosquitoes disturbed by their passage, and breaking branches off shrubs they waved them to and fro in front of them as they stumbled along. In spite of this protection, however, they were frequently bitten, and felt relieved when they saw the sea glinting through the tree trunks ahead and knew they were near the camp. Soon afterwards they reached the tent, and after a short rest were busy over the preparation of another meal, for they were both very hungry after the expedition.

Throughout the afternoon they were busy making a bonfire on a bit of rising ground about midway between Boulder Point and the stream; and though dragging the heavy pieces of broken timber over the sand was hard work in the burning heat, they had soon accumulated sufficient fuel for their purpose, and, making a large heap of dry

palm debris and grass, piled the wood on top of it in a rough pyramid until it was six feet high. On the top they placed a small barrel of tar, washed ashore from the ship, and this, when the bonfire was well alight, would give out a volume of black smoke which should be visible many miles away.

That evening, just after sunset, the boys, having finished their evening meal, were sitting outside the tent before going to bed. Billy was hard at work netting a hammock, but Roger, who had paid a visit to the wreck, was lying flat on the ground turning over the sodden pages of a green-covered book.

"Here we are!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Listen to this, Bill, and then try and remember if it fits in with the trees we saw this morning."

"Fire away!" said Billy, looking up from his work.

"A rather slender tree," began Roger, "often fifty feet high and rising to nearly half its height without a branch. It has large pin—pinnatifid leaves. What on earth's pinnatifid, I wonder?"

Billy shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sure I don't know," he replied.

"Pinnatifid leaves," resumed the reader, pronouncing the word with difficulty, "frequently eighteen inches long, and of a dark glossy green. The fruit is generally about the size of a child's head, and is covered with a rough rind. At first it is green; when half ripe, brown; and when fully ripe, a rich yellow."

"That tallies all right," remarked Billy. "What is it?"

"Half a mo'!" said the other. "Where had I got to? Oh yes, a rich yellow. The fruit is attached to the small branches by a thick stem, and hangs either singly or in clusters of two or three together. That's our tree all right. Guess what it is."

Billy shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "I've never seen anything like it before."

"It's bread fruit!"

"Bread fruit!" echoed Billy, who had read of it in books, and had a hazy idea of its uses. "Bread fruit! By George, if we only knew how to cook it!"

"It gives it here," said Roger, turning over the page. "Listen to this: The usual practice in the South Seas is to cut the fruit into three or four pieces, and take out the white mealy core. Heated stones are then placed in a hole in the ground, and these are then covered with green leaves. Upon these the cut-up fruit is placed, then stones, leaves, and more fruit alternately till the hole is nearly filled, when more leaves and earth several inches thick are placed over all. In about half an hour the fruit is cooked, the outside being well browned and the inner part presenting a white cellular substance something like the crumb of a wheaten loaf in taste and appearance."

"Sounds good," said Billy; "makes my mouth water to think of it. It seems easy enough to cook too."

"Yes; and it'll be better than biscuits," answered Roger, shutting the book and going into the tent. "Come on, Bill, it's bedtime, and I'm jolly sleepy."

"So am I," said the other, yawning as he went into the tent.

In another half-hour the glow of the departed sun had faded from the sky, and by the time the stars had begun to twinkle both boys were once more fast asleep.

CHAPTER V

Billy and Roger fall out

THERE are many different methods of building a hut, and simple as a log cabin looks when it is once finished, its successful erection is by no means the easy task some people imagine.

"I don't see why we want the wretched hut at all," remarked Roger in a petulant voice the next morning after breakfast, when the subject was being discussed; "why won't the tent do?"

He had turned out in a very bad temper, and breakfast had been eaten in a strained atmosphere, in which Billy's remarks, intended to disperse the feeling of hostility in the air, had been received in dead silence or with surly, ill-tempered grunts.

"My dear chap," said Billy with a smile, "I've told you before that the tent's all right in this sort of weather; but supposing it comes on to blow or rain hard, what then?"

Roger glowered. "Aren't there any caves or anything?" he finally demanded; "building a hut's going to be a beastly fag."

"Of course it is," replied Billy; "everyone knows that. But why you want to turn rotten over it instead of trying to give a chap a hand I'm sure I don't know. Can't you see that if we don't pull together we can never do anything?"

"Aren't there any caves?" repeated the other.

"You know jolly well there aren't," said Billy, "at any rate on this side of the island, and we must live somewhere near the stream. Besides, why didn't you raise all these objections when we talked about the hut yesterday? You know we want one, and you'll be pretty sorry for yourself when it starts to rain if you have nothing but the tent."

"Then go and build the rotten thing by yourself!" exclaimed Roger in an angry voice; "the tent's quite good enough for me."

"So you say now, but you'll be sorry later on."

"Oh no, I won't!" declared the other with rapidly rising temper.

"You needn't lose your hair about it, anyway," said Billy. "I'm going off to look for a place to build it."

"Well, I'm not coming with you," called out Roger as the other turned his back and walked off towards the stream. "You needn't expect me to help you either!"

"I haven't asked you to," retorted Billy over his shoulder. "I can't stand a chap who's always losing his temper."

"Temper!" snorted Roger. "What d'you mean?"

Billy did not reply, for he saw that Roger was in a rage, and thought it best to leave him to cool down; and, crossing the stream, he set about searching for a suitable site among the coconut palms on the other side, for there the ground looked more promising. He clearly perceived that the building of the hut was going to be more difficult than he had first thought, particularly so if Roger refused to assist; for though vast quantities of broken timber had been washed ashore from the wreck, there was nothing in the shape of light planking with which the walls of the proposed dwelling could be constructed. Portions of the *Saracen's* deck had been cast up on the beach, but the planks of which it had been composed were thick and

narrow, while there were not nearly enough for the purpose; and the only other alternative would be to procure the necessary material by cutting down trees and palms. This would entail a great amount of extra labour, for each length of wood would have to be sawn to the requisite length and shape, while the cutting and erection of the corner posts, which would have to be stout enough to support the weight of the roof, would take a considerable time and an infinite amount of labour.

To tell the truth, Billy felt rather disheartened, for though he fully realized that a more substantial dwelling than the tent was absolutely necessary, he foresaw all the difficulties which militated against its successful completion.

He also felt upset by Roger's behaviour, for there was no reason for it; and he understood well enough that life on an island with another boy who was perpetually losing his temper, and put every obstacle in the way of any work being done or improvements being made for their mutual benefit, was going to be anything but a happy existence.

He felt he must do something to bring the other to his way of thinking, so recrossing the stream he went towards Roger, who was walking aimlessly up and down the beach with a moody expression on his face.

"I wish you'd come and help," he said in his pleasantest voice, eager to smooth over the strained relations which existed between them; "it would be ever so much —"

"Why can't you leave me alone?" interrupted the other with a scowl. "If you want your rotten hut go and build the thing by yourself!"

"I don't quite know what you mean," said Billy; "you must surely see that a hut is necessary. I keep on telling you that the tent —"

"There you go again!" exclaimed Roger angrily,

"always harping on about the tent. You forget I put it up. It was my idea, and now, of course, you say it's rotten! If you'd built it yourself it would have been quite good enough, I suppose?" he concluded in a sneering voice.

"I don't want to crab your tent at all," answered Billy, who was beginning to feel angry; "it's done very well up to date, but then we've had decent weather."

"Why can't we go on using it then?"

"You needn't get so snappy about it," retorted Billy. "I've told you again and again that the tent's excellent in fine weather. The fact of the matter is, you're in such a vile temper that if I suggest anything you promptly think I'm trying to annoy you."

"You needn't be so condescending about it!" shouted Roger, his unreasoning rage getting the better of him. "You seem to think you're boss here. You're always telling me what to do and how to do it. You seem to forget who you are."

"What do you mean?" asked Billy in a quiet voice, which, if Roger had stopped to consider, he would have interpreted as a danger signal. "What do you mean by saying I forget who I am?"

"What do I mean?" stormed the other. "What do I mean? You forget you were a cabin-boy and that my father was captain of the ship. You were always putting on airs on board, but now you're a jolly sight worse. I'll take good care I let people know who you are when we're rescued!"

"Don't care if you do," retorted Billy angrily. "I'm not ashamed of having to earn my own living. You'd better be very careful what you say though."

"I'll say what I jolly well please!" screamed Roger.

"You won't, unless you want a licking!" answered Billy, turning away with the intention of leaving the other

to himself, for by this time Roger had worked himself up into an overpowering rage, and further discussion could only end in active strife.

"Yes I will!" shrieked Roger, white with anger. "You say your father was a gentleman, but what gentleman would have a son a cabin-boy, I should like to know?"

"Unsay that at once!" cried Billy, clenching his fists and turning round.

"No I won't!"

"If you don't, I'll go for you!"

"Come on, then, I'm not afraid of you!"

Hardly were the words spoken when the battle had begun. Neither of the boys knew very much about boxing, but the lack of science in the combat was more than made up for by its vigour, as, circling round each other, they closed and struck whenever opportunities presented themselves. The energy of many of the blows was expended fruitlessly in the air, but sometimes the clenched fists went home, and for the first few minutes the eventual issue of the fight seemed doubtful.

Billy fully realized what a lot depended upon the result of the encounter. If he allowed Roger to beat him his position as leader could no longer be maintained, while the latter, who would no doubt take advantage of the victory if he did win, would resume his old bullying habits and make life on the island absolutely intolerable. Roger, on his part, fought bravely enough, for he knew that if he was defeated he would have to acknowledge Billy's superiority once and for all, and time after time he closed in and struck wildly at his antagonist's head and shoulders.

Billy, to start with, acted strictly on the defensive, and while delivering an occasional shrewd blow, contented himself mainly with parrying or avoiding those of his enemy. His object was to tire the other out as much as possible, and then to defeat him at his leisure, and though

in the process he received a certain amount of punishment, for his mouth felt strangely swollen and he could taste the salt of a trickle of blood from a cut lip, his tactics certainly paid, for Roger became more and more breathless as the combat went on. Billy, too, had the advantage in that his adversary became more and more angry every time he was struck, and in his blind rage many of his blows went wide. Billy, on the other hand, though he was sorely tried, managed to keep his temper, and the consequence was that before very long he was getting the best of it. Roger's wild lunges became feebler and feebler, and the other boy's fists rained a shower of blows on his head until a rapidly swelling eye and a cut cheek showed what punishment he was receiving. Presently a severe punch on the nose brought a torrent of blood flowing down the lower part of his face until it dripped on to his shirt, and as Billy's blows went home time after time the gore was spread all over Roger's swollen countenance.

"Had enough?" gasped Billy, stopping for a moment, for he saw that his enemy was nearly done.

The other made no reply, but advanced upon his antagonist flourishing his fists. He was, it must be admitted, game to the end, for though there was now absolutely no doubt as to the result, he still fought on, though his breath came in gasps and his efforts to hit his adversary were absolutely futile. Billy, compared with Roger, was fresh, and though, if he had wished to, he could have half-killed him, he contented himself by warding off his wild blows. He had no wish to hurt him more than was necessary, and presently Roger's breathing became more and more stertrous, until he finally had to stop from sheer exhaustion.

"Had enough?" asked Billy again.

Roger nodded and endeavoured to stanch the flow of blood from his nose.

"D'you take back what you said about my father?"

“Yes,” murmured Roger feebly.

“Will you ever say such a thing again?” demanded the victor.

Roger shook his head.

“Well, will you make it up then?” queried Billy, holding out his hand.

“No, I won’t,” said Roger in a breathless voice full of temper, and with the tears of passion still in his eyes. “I hate you!”

“I don’t care if you do,” retorted Billy, as he walked off towards the stream to wash away the traces of the conflict and to bathe his battered face. “I despise you, but next time you’d better be careful what you say about me or my father.”

For the first time since he had been on the island Billy felt really miserable and depressed. He knew well enough that he had been wronged, and that Roger had been entirely responsible for the quarrel, but it surprised him that he should bear so much ill-will when he himself, the injured party, was quite ready to forgive and forget what had occurred. He had hopes that when Roger’s temper died away, and he had had an opportunity of seeing things in their true light, he would come and try to make it up; but when the morning passed by and nothing happened he gave it up as a bad job. He well understood that under existing conditions life on the island would be absolutely intolerable, but at the same time he was fully determined to teach the other a well-needed lesson, and made up his mind that as his efforts at reconciliation had been spurned, any further advances should come from the other side. He also resolved to leave Roger alone and to ignore him altogether until he saw fit to apologize; and as he had no wish to bring about a further quarrel over the subject of the tent, he spent the remainder of the morning in erecting a canvas shelter on the other side of the stream.

He also took with him one of the rifles and ammunition, and some tinned provisions and biscuits, so as to avoid coming into contact with his enemy.

Soon after noon, by which time he had finished his tent, and was lunching off cold corned beef and flinty ship's biscuit, he saw Roger preparing his own hot meal in the other camp; and though he felt jealous that he should have to put up with cold food while the other could cook what he wanted, for he had been compelled to leave the stove behind on account of its weight, he kept his back studiously turned. The two boys were within twenty yards, but each pretended not to have seen the other; and though Billy felt angry at Roger's indifference, he could hardly restrain himself from laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

There certainly was something comic in the fact that the two of them, the only human beings on the island, were treating each other as if the other did not exist, and for a minute or two he felt sorely tempted to make one more effort to end the farce. On glancing over his shoulder with that idea in his mind, however, he saw that Roger had sat himself down with his back turned; and abandoning the thought, he finished his meal, and, shouldering the rifle, set off along the beach with assumed indifference, and whistling as he went to show Roger how little he really cared. He set out with the intention of making a further exploration of the island, but had barely gone twenty yards when he suddenly remembered the bread-fruit trees they had come across the day before; and pleased at the idea of having some definite occupation to distract his mind and to while away the time, he turned inland to procure some of the fruit, with the intention of cooking it according to the instructions in the book taken from the ship.

It did not take him very long to reach the spot where

the trees grew, but directly he looked at their smooth stems he saw that it would be a difficult, if not impossible, task to climb them, and for a minute or two he thought he would have to give it up as a bad job. The lowest branches on which he could obtain a foothold were fully twenty feet above his head, while the girth of the tree trunks was too large to allow him to swarm up them; but casting round in his mind he suddenly hit upon an idea. If he could get hold of a thin line with a weight at the end of it he could throw it over one of the lower branches and then haul up a larger rope sufficient to bear his weight. He could then secure one end of this to the tree itself, and could climb up to pick the fruit he wanted. With this scheme in his head he retraced his footsteps towards the camp to procure the necessary materials.

On coming to the stream he noticed that Roger had disappeared, and, wading through the water, he walked along the beach to where they had piled all the rope washed ashore from the wreck. Cutting off enough for his purpose, and selecting a few fathoms of strong line, he recrossed the stream and returned to the clump of trees, and making his heavy sailor's knife fast to one end of his line he succeeded, after one or two attempts, in throwing it over one of the branches. He then knotted the larger rope to its free end and pulled it over the limb, and after securing one end firmly round the stem of the tree, swarmed up the other, and was soon seated on the branch with the fruits dangling round him. They were, apparently, quite ripe, for they were bright yellow, and choosing a couple of the smallest he placed them in his shirt together with some leaves; then lowering himself down he went back to his tent.

Procuring some smooth stones from the bed of the stream he built a fireplace similar to the one he had used the first day he had been washed ashore, and when the

wood was well alight placed the stones in the flames and spent the time, while they heated, in digging a hole in the ground with his hands. Lining its sides with green leaves he then cut the fruit into slices and placed a layer of these in the bottom of the hole, covering them with more leaves. By the time this had been done the stones were hot, and lifting them gingerly with two short sticks, he dropped them one by one on to the leaves until they were covered. Then, after adding another layer of leaves, fruit, and more heated stones, he finished up by covering the opening with a thick layer of earth to keep in the heat. He had now nothing to do but to await the result of his experiment with what patience he could muster, and sitting down with his back to a palm he looked round. What had become of Roger he did not know, for he was not visible in the other camp or on the beach, so Billy could only surmise that he had gone off exploring on his own account.

After about half an hour he removed the earth from the top of his home-made oven, and taking out the successive layers of leaves and stones came to the bread fruit. It was, if anything, slightly underdone, for it was not properly browned as the book had said it should be, but for all that it smelt very appetizing, and with a steaming hot piece in his hand he nibbled at one corner of it. It tasted good—something like the crumb of a newly-baked loaf—and he felt pleased with the result of his experiment; for even if the fruit was slightly under-baked, it was probably on account of the stones being insufficiently heated, and if he allowed a little more time on the next occasion, he would probably make a better job of it. Still, it was very delicious after the dry, uninteresting ship's biscuit he had been used to for so long, and he was soon busy munching.

He had barely taken a dozen mouthfuls, however, when he noticed the unmistakable odour of burning wood. Raising his head he sniffed, wondering what was alight, but

then, seeing that the breeze blew directly from the camp on the other side of the stream, he came to the conclusion that the smell of burning arose from the fire which Roger had kindled in the stove for cooking his midday meal. He therefore resumed his feast without any further thought, but before long the smell became more pronounced, and looking up again he noticed for the first time that thin wreaths of blue smoke were filtering through the tree trunks.

Then, and not before, it suddenly flashed through his mind what had happened.

Somebody had set a light to the beacon, for every moment the smoke was getting thicker and more pungent.

With a horrible suspicion in his mind that Roger had set fire to the bonfire in a fit of wanton anger and in revenge for what had taken place during the morning, he dropped the piece of bread fruit and leapt to his feet, and in a few seconds was splashing across the stream. Running at full speed along the beach, he soon came in sight of the spot where they had laboriously piled the wood the day before. It was even as he had surmised, for it was well alight and poured out clouds of smoke, while the flames were already licking the tar barrel on the top.

His first feeling on seeing it was one of extreme anger, for he felt certain that Roger had set it alight for the sheer love of annoying him, and seeing that the fire was already too far gone to be stopped he looked round for signs of the other boy. At first he could not see him, but presently, casting his eyes towards the spit of sand beyond him, he saw him standing on the top of the whitened boulder. He was gazing intently towards the horizon, with one hand up to his face to shade his eyes, and looking in the same direction Billy suddenly felt strangely excited. There, far away to seaward, and low down in the clear

blue sky, was a delicate feather of smoke. He looked at it for an instant in astonishment, thinking that what he saw was the result of his imagination; but there could be no doubt of its reality, for Roger had seen it too, and the smoke could only come from the funnel of some steamer whose hull was hidden below the horizon. Running on, he soon came to the rock on which the other was perched.

"It's a steamer!" he exclaimed breathlessly, for he had run fast.

"Yes," replied Roger without looking round, but with no traces of temper in his voice. "I saw her smoke about a quarter of an hour ago and lit the beacon at once. I wonder if she'll see the smoke?"

He looked back towards the bonfire, which was now burning vigorously.

"Don't know," said Billy; "she's a long way off, and the wind's blowing the smoke along flat instead of letting it rise."

"Suppose she doesn't see us?" queried the other anxiously. "Suppose she goes on without taking us away?"

"Don't worry," urged Billy consolingly. "I vote we go to the top of the hill with the telescope; we'll be able to see her better from there!"

Roger jumped down from the rock, and before long, having procured Captain Wedderburn's telescope from the tent, the two boys were making the best of their way up the hill. They were far too excited to talk, and half running, half scrambling, and giving each other an occasional helping hand, they gradually climbed the slope. It seemed an eternity before they reached the summit on which the Red Ensign on its staff fluttered bravely in the breeze, but presently they arrived upon the little grass-grown plateau. Flinging himself prone on the ground, and steadying the telescope against a boulder, for his whole body was shaking

Billy and Roger fall out 69

after his exertion, Billy focused it on the distant vessel, whose hull was now visible above the horizon.

"She's a tramp," he observed at length, after a long look. "One funnel and two masts. She's at least fifteen miles off, though," he added in rather a disappointed voice.

He did not like to add that it would be extremely unlikely that the men on board her would notice either the flapping ensign or the smoke of their fire at that distance.

"Let's have a look," said Roger.

Billy handed the telescope across, and the other boy gazed through it for some minutes without speaking.

"She's going away!" he remarked at length, and with a mournful catch in his voice. "She'll never s—see—us." He sniffed and tried to force back the tears which would persist in coming to his eyes.

There was no doubt that the steamer was gradually getting farther away, for she grew smaller and smaller as the boys watched her.

"Is there nothing we can do?" asked Roger in a strained voice, turning to his companion.

"No, nothing," said Billy, shaking his head mournfully, for he had given up all hope.

They both gazed longingly at the gradually receding speck on the horizon. It seemed so hard to think that there, within comparatively a few miles of them, was a ship, probably manned by their own countrymen, whose attention they had no further means of attracting; and as he watched her steaming past, Billy was suddenly smitten with a horrible feeling of despair and disappointment.

Supposing no ship ever did come close enough to the island to see their signals?

He shivered at the idea, for though the life there would be pleasant enough for a short time, it would soon become very monotonous, and he did not relish the thought of spending the remainder of his days within its narrow

boundaries. He felt the tears coming to his eyes at the thought of what that distant ship meant to them, but he brushed them away with his hand, for it would never do if both of them gave way to their disappointment; for Roger had burst into a fit of weeping and was rocking himself to and fro on the ground in a paroxysm of grief.

"Buck up, old man!" said Billy in what he hoped sounded a cheerful voice. "Buck up! Don't worry about it! If one ship passes before we've been here a week you can bet your boots we're somewhere near the track of shipping." He patted his companion on the back, for he had forgotten his anger and was now only sorry for him.

"We'll never g-get away f-from this b-b-beastly island," sobbed Roger. "I know we won't."

"Never say die!" urged Billy, concealing his own bitter disappointment as best he could.

But Roger refused to be comforted and the tears still streamed down his face, and leaving him to himself, Billy took the telescope to watch the distant vessel. Her hull now looked like a speck on the horizon, but presently it sank from view, and five minutes later nothing could be seen except the top of the funnel and the two masts. He watched them with anguish until they also faded into nothingness, and when at last they had vanished he shut up the telescope with a snap and nearly gave way to his feelings by bursting into tears.

The steamer's smoke still hung in the clear atmosphere, but at length, as the sun began to get low in the eastern horizon, and the clear blue sky became overshot with the gorgeous pink and orange of the dying day, it too faded and finally disappeared. It had formed, as it were, the last link with civilization, and gazing at the spot where he had last seen the filmy trail spread out across the sky, Billy felt an awful feeling of utter loneliness creeping over him.

"Has she gone?" asked Roger, looking up.

Billy nodded, for he could not trust himself to speak, and for some minutes and in dead silence the boys looked out across the calm sea, which was now shimmering and sparkling with the reflected glory from the sky. It was then they both began to realize what they meant to each other, and how much depended upon their remaining friends, but it was Roger who finally broke the silence.

"Bill," he remarked in a feeble voice.

"Hallo, what is it?"

"Bill, I'm sorry I made a beast of myself this morning," said Roger, with his mouth quivering and in a very apologetic tone.

"That's all right, don't worry about it."

"I'm really sorry, though," repeated Roger, reaching out for and clasping the other's hand. "I know I was in the wrong, and I'm quite ready to help you with the hut." His voice broke, and he burst into another fit of sobbing.

"That's all right, Roger," said Billy kindly, pressing his hand. "Don't let's say any more about it."

"You don't know how miserable and lonely I feel sometimes," continued Roger between his sobs. "I feel sort of —Oh! I can't explain."

"I quite understand. I feel so myself sometimes," answered Billy. "Come on, old chap," he added, "it's high time we got back to the camp; it'll be dark pretty soon."

"Yes, I suppose we'd better make a move," agreed the other, wiping away his tears. "I'm a silly fool to blub like this, but I feel better now I've got it off my chest. We're friends now, Bill, aren't we?"

"Of course we are. Don't be such an ass!"

They left the hilltop and scrambled down the slope, and before long arrived at the stream.

"By George! I nearly forgot my bread fruit," exclaimed

The Boy Castaways

Billy when he was halfway across. "I picked some this afternoon and tried cooking it. It's fine. Like some for supper?" He went back towards his oven, followed by Roger.

"Rather!" said the other cheerfully. "What's it like?"

"Exactly like new bread," said Billy, raking out the stones and leaves from the hole. "Taste a bit now." He handed the other boy a slice.

"Much better than biscuit," agreed Roger a moment later with his mouth full. "Jolly good stuff I call it!" He smacked his lips appreciatively.

That evening the boys had an extra special supper, for they both felt they wanted cheering up after their disappointment, and when at last, long after their usual time, they crept into the tent for the night, it was with a decided feeling of repletion. Roger, in fact, had to let his belt out, and no wonder, for the evening meal had consisted of soup, fried sausages, sardines, a tinned plum pudding which could not be persuaded to boil, and was accordingly eaten in its original glutinous condition straight out of the tin, and unlimited quantities of bread fruit, washed down with hot coffee.

"My aunt!" murmured Roger lazily, rolling over in his blankets, "what a gorgeous feed!"

"We have made rather pigs of ourselves!" laughed Billy, who had eaten just as much as Roger, "and I only hope we'll be fit for work to-morrow. I don't feel much like walking a yard now, and we've got to build another beastly bonfire."

"Yes," said the other, "and we haven't washed up the plates and things!"

"Nor we have. Never mind, though, I'm much too sleepy to think about 'em now."

"So'm I. Good night, Bill!"

"Good night!"

CHAPTER VI

The Hut

THE next five days passed rapidly enough, for throughout the whole period the boys were hard at work erecting the framework of their hut. They had selected a site on some level ground in the palm grove on the eastern bank of the stream, and though the greater portion of the material they used consisted of spars and deck planks from the wreck, the work was very trying, for every inch of timber had to be sawn to the proper length and shape. The fixing of the four corner posts was even more difficult than Billy had imagined, and to make matters worse the days had been unusually hot, for the brilliant sun had hung in the sky as a molten white hot mass, whose fierce rays were unmitigated by the least vestige of cloud or breath of wind. They had been forced to work, so far as possible, in the cool of the morning and evening, reserving the middle of the day for rest; but even during their hours of labour the heat had been so intense that the shade offered by the palms did not afford any apparent relief, and they were not sorry when the inner skeleton of the house was completed, for it was undoubtedly the hardest part of the undertaking. Neither of the boys had much knowledge of carpentering, and nothing surprised them more than that they should succeed in making a substantial job of the framework; and though it is true it did not look very neat, for in many places, where nails would not hold, the timbers had had to

The Boy Castaways

be secured with rope lashings, it appeared as if it would stand anything short of a hurricane of extraordinary violence.

"Hurrah! Thank goodness we've done that!" exclaimed Billy, mopping his streaming face when at last the framework stood finished and securely fixed. "We've got through the hardest part, and now we've only the roof and sides to do."

"I've been thinking," said Roger. "You know you suggested making the roof of branches?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about canvas? We could nail a double thickness on and then give it a coat of paint to make it properly water-tight."

"That's quite a good idea," agreed the other. "Canvas seems far better than branches. And what d'you think about the sides?"

Roger scratched his head and thought. "They must be wood," he announced. "But I don't think we ought to have very much difficulty. We could cut down some of the palms and split 'em up, and then nail the pieces to the framework."

"They'll have to be jolly carefully fitted if the affair's to be water-tight."

"Shove another lot of canvas on the inside as a lining; we've plenty to spare."

"Yes, that ought to do," agreed Billy, beginning to collect the tools he had been using. "But I vote we give the rotten old hut a rest now and go and have a bathe. I'm beastly hot!"

Three more days' work saw the hut complete, and really, taking into consideration all the difficulties the boys had to contend with, and their very slight knowledge of carpentering, the finished dwelling reflected great credit upon its builders.

It was an erection about fifteen feet long by ten wide, with its outer walls constructed of untrimmed palm stems cut in half longitudinally and nailed on to the interior framework. At the back and on either side openings to serve as windows had been cut in the walls, and as there was no glass available for these the boys, with much ingenuity, had fitted them with canvas blinds outside to keep out the sun, and wooden shutters inside which could be swung into place to keep out the wind and rain in the event of bad weather.

In the front of the building, which faced the stream, were two more windows and the door, the latter, working on its own hinges and fitted with a lock and key, having been taken intact from the ship and set up in place. Along the front also was a species of veranda made of white-painted canvas stretched on poles, while the roof of the dwelling itself was made of the same material covered over with green branches for the sake of coolness, and had in its centre one portion of the cabin skylight of the *Saracen*, in which the glass had not been smashed.

Inside, the walls had been lined with canvas nailed taut on to the framework and painted white, while the grass underfoot had been cut, the earth beaten flat, and sail-cloth put down as a floorcovering. They had thought of putting up a couple of bunks from the wreck for sleeping purposes, but on further consideration it was decided that these would take up too much room in their small abode, so they contented themselves with fixing hooks from which they could hang the hammocks in which they now slept.

A couple of lamps, a small table from the *cuddy*, some chairs, and a cupboard in which they intended to keep their cooking and eating utensils, were brought ashore and completed the furniture; but, for the time being at any rate, and from the inflammable nature of the hut, they

wisely decided to leave the stove outside and to continue doing their cooking in the open air.

The finished dwelling certainly did look very snug, for the interior, with its white-painted walls, was light, airy, and spotlessly clean, and, with the addition of their few personal belongings and a bookshelf filled with volumes taken from the officers' cabins of the *Saracen*, presented quite a homely appearance. The one thing they missed was a watch or clock, but all those on board the ship, as well as the chronometers in the captain's cabin, had had their works irretrievably ruined by the salt water when the ship had struck on the reef. Still, the absence of a time-piece was a small inconvenience, for by this time they had both got into the habit of telling the hour by the position of the sun.

It was sixteen days after they had been cast ashore when they finally moved into their new residence, and that evening after supper Billy, who had taken care to procure writing materials from the wreck, was busy writing up his diary, or "log" as he called it.

"Let's see," he asked, with his pen poised, "what's the date?"

"9th—February the 9th," replied Roger after a mental calculation. "There are sixteen notches on the tree, and we ran ashore on the morning of the 24th."

"Sixteen days!" remarked Billy. "Seems more like sixteen weeks. By Jove," he added, "neither of us had any idea this time a year ago where we should be now. Heigho! It might be a jolly sight worse though." He yawned as he shut up the book in which he had been writing. "I'm going out to have a look round outside, and then I'm all for bed; we've had a jolly long day of it."

He went out and walked through the palms on to the beach.

The day was fast drawing to a close, and already the sun was sinking to rest behind a banked-up cluster of clouds on the western horizon. There was something forbidding and ominous in the pall of dull purple vapour through which the great orb itself showed as a glowing globe of crimson fire, for here and there, where shafts of light played on its upper rounded surfaces, it had assumed a coppery aspect which Billy had never seen before. The sky, too, instead of being flushed with the usual rosy pink of the sunset, presented a surface overshot with different shades of yellow, varying in tone from the palest primrose to vivid gamboge; while in other places there were bands and patches of brilliant orange, pale green, and copper red. The colours were intermingled in gorgeous chaotic confusion, but yet blended together in wonderful harmony, until the background, against which the cloud mass on the horizon stood out abruptly as a coppery-purple curtain, appeared like the shot surface of some marvellous silken fabric.

The sea was of an oily calmness, only disturbed by a slight swell rolling down from the north-west, and it reflected all the glory of the sky with the infallible accuracy of a mirror. But beautiful as the spectacle was, there was something in the lavish display of colour that the boy did not like. He had always heard from Mr. Hardcastle that a copper-coloured sky was a bad sign, and here he had it with a vengeance, so directly he noticed it he realized it portended bad weather.

“Roger!” he shouted.

“Hallo!” answered the other, coming to the door of the hut. “What’s up?”

“Come here a minute.”

Roger joined his companion on the beach, and for some minutes, though as a rule he was no lover of the beautiful, gazed in silence at the magnificent spectacle before him.

"I've never seen colours like that before," he remarked at length.

"No; it's most unusual," replied Billy, shaking his head apprehensively. "That's why I don't like it. Look at all that copper and green; I'm jolly certain it means bad weather!"

Presently as they watched, the red glowing disk of the sun slowly disappeared from view over the rim of the horizon, and soon the vivid colouring of the sky began to fade. Chill puffs of wind stirred the hitherto calm sea into activity, and when, ten minutes later, the darkness of the coming night began to encroach on the patch of colour lingering on the horizon, a steady breeze was blowing from the north-west.

Soon afterwards the transformation became more complete, for by degrees the clear sky became overcast with cloud masses driving down from windward. The black threatening-looking nimbus clouds spread themselves across the arch of the heavens; ragged wisps of white wrack stole across their faces, and then, as night fell with tropical abruptness, the wind suddenly grew until the waves broke on the beach in splutters of foam. Occasional heavy squalls, whistling in from seaward and carrying with them the spume torn from the wave tops, shrieked across the island until the sturdy palms bent like fishing-rods in the force of the blast, and clouds of sand and dried leaves were whirled through the air.

"We're in for a beastly night!" shouted Roger, putting his mouth close to his companion's ear to make himself heard.

"Yes!" bawled the other. "We'd better haul the dinghy as far up the stream as we can; this wind'll raise a pretty heavy sea."

They fought their way along the beach to where the boat lay at the mouth of the little river. Already the

waves were lifting her up and letting her fall on the beach with some violence, but after a hard struggle the boys succeeded in hauling her some distance up the stream, where they moored her by making the painter fast round a convenient tree trunk.

The air was damp with wind-flung spray as they made their way back to the hut, and as he entered the door Billy felt the first warm splash of rain on his face. Before long, as they barricaded the windows and door, a steady drumming overhead showed that the deluge had begun in earnest. Luckily they had built the roof with a slope so that the water could run off before it had a chance of collecting, and though in places the canvas soon sagged dangerously, and small trickles found their way through the stout fabric, a constant splashing outside showed that the greater portion of the water was running away.

The wind howled and whistled round the hut until the whole erection shook and trembled with the force of the blast; but there was nothing more to be done, and, feeling thankful that they had a roof over their heads, the boys slung their hammocks and turned in to spend the night as best they could. Presently a series of crashes and a sound of flapping and tearing canvas told that the veranda outside had been torn away, but they could do nothing to save it, and Billy lay awake listening to the gale and the steady beat of the rain on the roof. It seemed hours to him that he remained conscious, for the din outside was terrific, but at length he sank off into a troubled sleep, and with the rocking of the hut, which in turn imparted a swaying motion to his hammock, dreamt he was once more on board the *Saracen*.

It seemed to him, however, that he had barely been asleep for more than a few minutes when he was suddenly awoken by an appalling crash quite close at hand. He started up in alarm, thinking that the wind had demolished

the hut, but on looking round felt reassured, for as far as he could see in the darkness of the interior everything appeared as it should be. He had evidently been asleep for some hours, for the skylight in the roof showed an oblong patch of grey twilight which heralded the approach of dawn. The drumming of the rain had also ceased, though the gale still whistled round the hut with all its former violence, as, unable to account for the crashing sound he had heard, he put one leg out of his hammock.

“Roger,” he called, “are you awake?”

“Yes,” answered the other. “I’ve hardly had a wink of sleep with all this row going on.”

“Did you hear that row just now?”

“I should jolly well think I did; I expect a palm’s been blown down.”

“It must have been pretty close,” said Billy, jumping out of his hammock and going to the door, which he proceeded to unbar. “I’m going outside to have a look round.”

Roger left his hammock and joined him, and together they opened the door and stepped outside.

The force of the gale nearly blew the door off its hinges, but they eventually succeeded in closing it without damage, and linking their arms together for mutual support walked round the hut. The day was just about to break, and in the grey half-light a terrible scene of desolation met their eyes. The fierce downpour of the night had converted the once-dry land into a sodden muddy quagmire, intersected by numerous miniature watercourses carrying off the contents of the supersaturated soil. The grass, too, had been beaten flat, and many of the bushes had been stripped of their foliage until they appeared as bare, forlorn-looking skeletons, but the principal damage had been wrought by the wind.

The sturdy tendrils of the wild vines in the bush growth

had been rent and torn in all directions, while broken branches hung from many of the trees, and white scars showed on the trunks of others where limbs had been wrenched off bodily and hurled aside. Many of the palms, too, had been uprooted and lay splintered on the ground, while others had had their feathery tops removed cleanly as if with a knife. One gigantic palm, in particular, lay with its thick stem within six feet of the hut, and it was the crash of its fall which had awakened Billy. If it had descended upon the hut it would have utterly demolished the dwelling and severely injured, if not killed, the boys, and they both gave vent to a sigh of relief at the merciful escape.

The wind still blew with hurricane force. The sea in the little cove was running mountains high, and the combers dashed themselves on the beach until in their fury they broke in showers of spray which were carried far inland on the wings of the wind. The sea too had advanced far above its usual high-water mark, and the larger waves frequently reached the palms themselves; so it was well the hut had been built some distance inland, or it would have been washed away. The stream was swollen by the rain to double its ordinary width, and its once clear waters had been transformed into a spouting brown torrent which rushed and leapt as it drove its way seaward over the rock-strewn bed. The dinghy, however, though she lay in midstream straining at her painter, was still safely moored.

Looking seawards they noticed the black bows of the ill-fated *Saracen* still wedged firmly on the reef, but the stern portion of the wreck seemed to have been swept away, for the stump of the mizzenmast had completely disappeared. In the shallow water in the vicinity of the ship the sea was converted into a boiling, heaving area of whitened water, while at times the wreck was obscured

by the clouds of flying spray. The steep, wind-driven billows, lashed into fury by the gale, and with their summits crowned with masses of milky-white foam, advanced upon the coral barrier in their regular order and irresistible anger. But on encountering the reef, whose extent was clearly marked by the play of the water, they lost all the rhythmic order of their approach, for they rose and fell, up and down, up and down, in wonderful chaotic confusion and majestic fury.

By sunrise occasional blue rifts could be seen between the scurrying clouds in the sky overhead, while soon afterwards the great luminary began to shed his grateful warmth until the moist exhalations of the saturated soil ascended in wreathing eddies of filmy vapour.

By the time breakfast was over, the sky had cleared until only a few scattered bunches of cloud travelled across its face on the wings of the now dying wind. The sea also had gone down, and save for a heaving swell rolling into the cove the great ocean had resumed its usual tranquillity. During the day, which the boys spent in repairing the damage wrought by the gale, the smooth-bosomed hillocks of water gradually lessened in size, and by the latter part of the afternoon all signs of the storm, except for the uprooted palms and other damage done by the wind, had passed.

The evening came, and once more the sun sank to rest in a rosy flush which betokened fine weather for the morrow. Once again the velvety blue canopy of night, powdered with its glittering array of stars, was drawn across the sky. The palm leaves rustled softly in the gentle evening breeze, which raised ripples on the water of the cove until the reflection of the constellations danced and scintillated with the motion.

The frogs set up their dismal croaking. Night had come.

CHAPTER VII

A Junk Arrives

THE boys had set apart the next day for a more complete exploration of the island than had hitherto been possible. Up to the present they had not attempted to penetrate the bush, and had little or no idea of what the ground was like in the interior of their little domain. They accordingly determined to force or cut their way through the under-growth on the eastern bank of the stream, and to work their way across the island close under the precipitous slopes of the hill.

It was a beautiful morning when they rose, and the heavy rain seemed to have cleared the sky until it was as blue as the heart of a turquoise. Its vast expanse was undimmed by the least suspicion of cloud, but a slight breeze coming in from the sea seemed to make it cooler than usual, and therefore an ideal day for the heating work of forcing a pathway through the bush. The boys breakfasted early, and carrying hatchets, and with their fire-arms and sufficient food and water to last them for the day slung over their backs in haversacks and water bottles, they started off on the expedition soon after the sun showed over the rising land near Point Wedderburn.

The scent of the rich damp earth combined with the exquisite freshness of the tropical morning acted upon them like a tonic, and they were both in the highest spirits as they set off. The healthy open-air life on the island,

the sufficiency of good wholesome food, and the hard work, had made them wonderfully fit, and with their faces and arms tanned a deep red by the powerful sun, they looked a sturdy enough couple as they trudged off side by side talking.

The free natural existence had done them good, and though in a sense it was roughing it, there was no doubt that they had both been improved and developed in the process. On board the *Saracen* Roger had been lazy and indolent, but here, where he had been forced to do his fair share of the work, he had changed into quite a different being. He was thinner, it is true, but much of his former flabbiness had become transformed into muscle, and, through force of circumstances perhaps, he had acquired a keenness and a liking for hard work which had never been evident to those who knew him on board the ship.

Billy, too, felt a different person altogether, for though he had always been strong and in good condition, the strenuous days spent in the open sun-laden air were far more to his liking than his menial occupations as a cabin-boy. On the island he had always something tangible to show for his work, and the inventing of new ways and means of circumventing difficulties, and the exercising of his creative faculty in the construction of a hundred and one little appliances, or the arranging of the numerous details, all of which helped to make life on the island a matter of comparative comfort, had been a constant source of joy and pleasure. Though naturally intelligent, Billy was by no means a boy of extraordinary attainments, but hard work seemed to suit him, and he always did what he had to do with that plodding determination which is one of the most important factors of success.

Moving inland through the fringe of palms on the bank of the stream, they presently came to a thick, tangled

barrier of bush which defied all their efforts when they endeavoured to force their way through it.

"We'll have to cut our way," remarked Billy at last, turning up his shirt sleeves and eyeing the sturdy intertwined stems and the dense foliage. "We can't shove our way through it, that's quite certain!"

"I think there's only a small belt of this thick stuff," said Roger, standing on tiptoe to see over it. "There are trees the other side, but they're not very close together, so perhaps the ground's clear."

"I hope it is," replied Billy, unslinging his rifle and haversack, and attacking the first stubborn stem with his axe.

The cutting of a passage was terribly hard work, and the perspiration was soon running in streams down their faces; and though the palm leaves overhead sheltered them from the sun, the heat in the little plantation was oppressive, the spot being sheltered from the cooling sea breeze. Still they slashed and hewed away at the tough growth, and after twenty minutes' trying work broke their way through the tangled plants into the comparatively clear ground beyond. The bush grew, as Roger had pointed out, in a natural barrier or hedge barely more than thirty feet wide, and once past it they found themselves on the border of a thickly-wooded patch of luxuriant tropical growth.

Here they sat for some minutes to recover their breath, but after a short halt Billy sprang up and reslung his knapsack and rifle.

"Come on, Roger," he said, "this looks a ripping wood, and I vote we go on."

"Right-o!" agreed the other, getting up. "I'm ready."

Walking on parallel to the stream, they found the soft springy ground was covered with rank grass reaching as high as their knees; and though on several occasions

they were forced to make detours to avoid clumps of impenetrable bamboo, or patches of thick tangled under-growth overhung with dense masses of creeper and vine, their progress was far easier than they had anticipated. To both boys, for neither of them had seen anything of the kind before, the wood seemed a veritable fairyland. The vivid greenery of the tropical growth, the sweet smell of the many-coloured flowers on the shrubs and trees, the twittering of the birds in the branches overhead, the drowsy hum of the insects, and above all the wonderful colouring, seemed to lend to the place an air of enchantment. It certainly was a beautiful spot, for the tree ferns with their delicate fronds, wild orange, spiky-leaved bamboo, bread fruit, and many other trees and plants whose names they did not know, luxuriated in riotous exotic confusion. Roger, however, thinking that it might be of use, had brought with him in his haversack the book to which they had referred on first finding the bread fruit, and halting under a low tree, at the summit of which a number of green and golden globes hung under a tuft of leaves, began to turn over the pages.

"This is papaw," he announced triumphantly, showing an illustration to his companion.

"Papaw—what's that?"

"Good to eat, anyhow," he answered. "Tastes like a melon, the book says, and rubbed over meat makes it tender!"

"Here goes then!" cried Billy, climbing up the short stem and detaching one of the ripest-looking of the fruit. "Catch!"

Roger caught it, and cutting it in half with his knife offered one section to Billy.

"Not bad," remarked the latter a moment later. "It is rather like melon, but there's not so much taste about it."

"No, it looks better than it tastes; let's go and look for something else."

They walked on and presently, close to the stream, came across a tree whose fruit they had often seen in England. It grew, with others of its kind, about fifteen feet high; and though, by its slender stem devoid of any branches, and curved with the weight of its long broad crinkled leaves and pendulous bunches of fruit, they knew it to be a kind of palm, the long yellow and green fingers showed it to be something far more important. It was, in fact, a wild plantain, and seeing it Billy ran forward with a howl of delight.

"Bananas!" he cried excitedly.

"Plantains!" corrected Roger. "These are great huge things; bananas are much smaller."

Billy did not hear the remark, for he had already swarmed halfway up the trunk, and taking care not to injure the bunches he reached out and tore off some of the fruit. He then descended with a rush and shared the results of his depredations with Roger.

"By George, this is a find!" mumbled the latter, with his mouth full of fruit, busy peeling another.

Billy nodded, for he could not speak, and for some minutes both boys were steadily munching.

"I wonder what other fruits there are in this blessed wood?" asked Billy eventually, looking up at the fruit over his head as if he contemplated procuring a further supply.

"No more, Bill!" laughed Roger, noticing the direction of his friend's glances and guessing his intention. "We've got to get home, and if we fill ourselves up with these we shan't have room for anything else."

The advice was certainly very sound, but Billy took his eyes off the tree with reluctance, for the plantains still looked very tempting.

The Boy Castaways

"What's that thing over there?" he suddenly asked, pointing to a large yellow globe lying on the ground under a tree with small leaves something like those of an ordinary cherry.

Roger walked over to the spot and picked it up. It was roundish oblong in shape and about the size of a man's head, while it had a hard rind covered with spines. "I've never seen anything like it before," he remarked, turning it over in his hand and then looking up at the tree where many more similar ones hung from the branches.

"Cut it open and let's have a look at its inside," advised Billy.

Roger opened his knife and made a long gash in the rind, but hardly had he done so when he threw the fruit from him with an expression of disgust.

"What's up? Has it bitten you?"

"Ugh! The beastly thing's bad!" replied Roger, holding his nose. "Stinks like anything!"

He kicked at it as it lay on the ground, but his action was ill advised, for his boot burst open the skin and a disgusting smell rose in the air.

"Phew! What a niff!" ejaculated Billy. "What on earth is it? It doesn't seem to be bad, though; all that white stuff looks quite all right." He went forward and gazed with curiosity at the creamy pulpy flesh of which the interior of the fruit was composed. "Look it up in the book."

Roger turned over the pages. "I can't find anything about it here," he said at length. "It doesn't—half a mo', though. I've got it; it's a durian: it's a fruit too—I mean it's good to eat."

"Glad to hear it," sniffed Billy; "it smells more like rotten fish!"

"It's a fruit all right, and the book says it has a creamy consistence and a delicious taste, but smells abominably."

"It can keep its creamy consistence to itself. I'm blowed if I'm going to sample it!"

"Nor am I," said Roger with a wry face. "I wouldn't touch a thing with a smell like that. Let's go on."

Advancing farther, the explorers presently came to the wall of cliff of which the western face of the hill was composed. Here and there the grey rock showed bare, but by far the greater portion of its surface was covered with the tangled festooned growth of hanging creepers, with occasional low bushes sprouting from fissures in the rock. In places the wall descended perpendicularly from the hill-top above, and skirting the fringe of thick bush growing at its base, the boys came to another peculiar-looking tree which at once attracted their attention. It was a "banyan" or "ficus", and from its many thick branches numbers of other stems depended vertically downwards until they had become firmly rooted in the spongy soil. The trunks thus formed spread over a wide area, until the one tree seemed to have developed into a regular copse of its own. Its dense foliage, too, with the masses of hanging creeper suspended from the upper branches, all but shut out the glare of the sun, and from the chattering and noise which went on, the boughs evidently afforded a home for numerous birds.

"By George, there's a monkey!" shouted Billy excitedly, for it was the first time he had seen one wild. "Saw the little beast grinning at me!"

"Where?" asked Roger eagerly.

"The whole tree's alive with 'em!" cried Billy, who saw numbers of the little brown human-looking faces peering out at him from amongst the thick leaves.

Suddenly, however, the inhabitants of the tree seemed to become aware of the proximity of human beings, for the chattering ceased, the monkeys disappeared abruptly, and a dense cloud of wild parrots, parakeets, pigeons, and other

The Boy Castaways

birds rose into the air with a whirr and a flapping of wings. Their brilliant plumage flashed scarlet, green, gold, and blue in the glinting sunlight, as with a shrill protest of indignation they fled from the presence of the monsters who had so ruthlessly disturbed their peaceful home. Going on, the boys were soon examining the tree itself. It certainly did seem wonderful how the thick hanging limbs, in some cases several feet in circumference, could sprout from the branches and drop down until they took root in the ground, and Billy was marvelling at it when Roger, who was a few paces farther on, made a sudden exclamation.

“What’s up?”

“Come here!” said the other in a voice breathless with excitement. “I’ve found something!”

Billy joined him, and looking in the direction of his outstretched finger gave vent to a gasp of surprise.

Roughly nailed to the central trunk of the giant ficus, the wood of which appeared to be rotting with age, was a sheet of discoloured metal. Round three of its sides the punctures where nails had been showed that it had once formed part of the copper sheathing of a ship, and going closer, for it was encrusted with verdigris, the boys were able to distinguish that it was covered with lettering apparently punched laboriously into its surface by a series of dots made with some sharp-pointed instrument.

“His Britannic Majesty’s sloop of war *Endeavour*,” so the crudely fashioned letters ran, “became a total loss on the reef to the northward of this island at 3 a.m. on 29th October, Anno Domini MDCCXXIII, when in chase of the pirate brig *Black Arrow*. Near this spot are interred the remains of Lieutenant John Codrington, Able Seaman Jas. Tucker, Boy William Gosling and Private Tobias Mulready, Royal Marines, who perished in the disaster. R.I.P. John Harding Wentworth, captain, Royal Navy.”

On the lower edge of the metal, and evidently punched

in by another hand after the sheet had been nailed in place, were the following words:—

“The survivors of H.B.M.S. *Endeavour*, numbering one hundred and nineteen souls, were rescued from this island by His Majesty’s frigate *Cerberus*. All well. ~~2nd December, MDCCCXXIII.~~ So they cried unto the Lord in their trouble and He delivered them from their distress.”

“What’s ~~MDCCCXXIII?~~” asked Roger, gazing at the rough inscription.

“One thousand, five—eight hundred, and twenty-three,” said Billy, figuring it out in his head. “1823. By Jove! that’s jolly nearly a hundred years ago. I wonder if the *Endeavour* was wrecked on the same reef as ours?”

“Must have been. That’s the only one to the north of the island. I wonder why they buried their people here though, and stuck the plate on this tree? If I had to do it I should shove it on one of the palms close to the sea where anyone landing would see it at once.”

“I expect the place was fairly clear when they did it,” answered Billy. “Everything,” he explained, “seems to grow very quickly here, and perhaps this was the only large tree on the island at the time.”

“But what about the palms close to the beach?”

“Very likely they weren’t there then,” said the other. “I’ve often read that a coconut’ll be washed ashore and take root even if it’s been in the water for ages. The palm grows up, and when the nuts are ripe they fall and sprout into new palms, and before long there’s a regular plantation. That’s why, where they haven’t been planted, you always see coconut palms close to the water’s edge: I mean when they’re young.”

“It’s wonderful to think of it,” said Roger, marvelling over one of the most mysterious of the works of nature. “I’ve often heard, too,” he added, to show that he was no ignoramus, “that the growth in these islands is spread by

the birds, which carry seeds from place to place and drop 'em. I wonder though," he continued, harking back to the subject which was uppermost in his mind, "what became of the *Black Arrow*, the pirate?"

"I expect she got away," answered Billy regretfully, "as the poor old *Endeavour* ran on the reef. What rotten luck, and how jolly sick Captain Wentworth must have been!"

"Yes, by Jove! But the whole thing's jolly exciting. I mean, finding this sheet of copper, and then about the pirates."

"Yes, makes me feel sort of creepy inside," said Billy.

"D'you think we'd be able to find anything of the graves?" asked the other. "They may have put up tombstones or something."

"I rather doubt it, the bush is so beastly thick. We might have a look round though."

For some time they searched the thick undergrowth without discovering any traces of the last resting-place of the dead officer and men of the man-of-war; but outside the limits of the ficus the vegetation was so thick that they realized from the first that their task was practically hopeless, and were not altogether disappointed at the unsuccessful search. They hunted round for half an hour or more, but at length gave up the quest, and picking their way along the clearer ground at the base of the hill eventually emerged at the pool they had come across on their previous expedition.

"What about a bathe?" suggested Billy, for the water looked deliciously cool and tempting. "I'm beastly hot!"

Roger needed no encouragement, for he too felt tired and heated after his exertions; and before very long both boys had shed their clothes and were disporting themselves in the clear limpid water. By the time they had finished the morning was well advanced, and as the blazing sun was

now high in the heavens, it was so intensely hot that they decided to remain where they were for the midday meal. As a matter of fact it was hardly lunch time, and neither of them, after the fruit they had eaten, felt very much inclined for the stodgy-looking corned beef. It seemed coarse and unpalatable after the luscious plantains, so they contented themselves with nibbling daintily at cooked bread fruit.

After an hour's rest the expedition was resumed, and leaving the hill behind them they proceeded to the southward, towards the small inlet they had named Saracen Cove. Reaching it without difficulty, they struck off to the westward with the idea of exploring the other portion of the island, but had barely gone a hundred yards when they found the little indentation extended farther inland than they had thought, and that what they had imagined to be bush was in reality a mangrove swamp. The plants themselves were little more than waist high, and the swamp was evidently covered at high tide, for quantities of seaweed had collected in the intertwining roots. The foul-smelling black ooze, now free of water, looked treacherous and slimy, and though perhaps not actually impassable, for the thick roots afforded a precarious foothold, the boys did not like the look of it, and so desisted from pushing farther.

"Look at the crabs!" suddenly exclaimed Roger, pointing excitedly. The mud was literally alive with them. Bright red, blue, pale olive grey, purple, and yellow—they were of all sizes and shapes, but the most common variety were small green creatures with one pink claw, which waved absurdly in the air as if beckoning the boys to approach. They were, in fact, the crabs usually found in tropical mangrove swamps; but as the boys had never seen anything of the kind before, the place seemed all the more eerie and weird from the presence of the scurrying multitudes.

The Boy Castaways

"Bah!" ejaculated Billy with an involuntary shudder, watching the horrible-looking creatures as they scrambled about with surprising activity and as if in a desperate hurry. "Ugh! Let's clear out of this place; it gives me the creeps!"

"Let's," agreed Roger. "My sainted aunt, they're enough to give anyone a fit! The smell's pretty beastly too!"

"I vote we go up there and shove the flagstaff up again," suggested Billy, pointing up at the conical hill. "I see it's been blown down."

"Right you are!"

They left the noisome swamp, and, circling the bush, were soon scrambling up the southern slope of the hill. By now the sun was well past the meridian, and climbing up the slippery turf and negotiating the patches of scrub and boulder-strewn spots was terribly hot and trying work.

"I wish to goodness we hadn't brought all this grub and the rifles," grumbled Roger, halting breathless half-way up the hill and mopping his streaming face; "they're a fearful weight!"

"Yes, my shoulder's all chafed," gasped the other, unslinging his haversack and rifle and feeling the tender spot with his hand. "We can't leave 'em behind though. What about a spell?"

"I'm all for it," agreed Roger, subsiding thankfully on the ground under the shadow cast by a huge boulder and taking a long pull at his water bottle. "Ah, that's good!"

They rested in the shade for nearly half an hour, and then, feeling all the fresher, resumed the laborious climb. Billy was the first to set foot on the little grass-grown plateau, but the minute he did so he saw something which made him fall flat on the turf.

"What in the——" began Roger.

"Lie down!" whispered Billy in an agitated whisper.
"Lie down and don't show yourself on the skyline!"

The other boy, surprised and nervous, for something was evidently amiss, did as he was told, and, falling flat on his stomach, wormed his way across the plateau and soon lay alongside his companion on the edge of the turf overlooking Point Wedderburn.

"What's up?" he asked in a whisper, for as yet he had seen nothing to account for Billy's peculiar behaviour.

"Look there!" said the other, pointing towards the reef.

Roger looked, and could hardly restrain a gasp of astonishment.

There, anchored close to the submerged reef, whose limits could be seen as a dark indigo shadow in the prevailing sapphire of the sea, was an enormous four-masted Chinese junk. She lay quite close to where the bows of the *Saracen* hung on the ledge, and as she was barely more than a mile from where the boys lay, every detail was clearly visible, even though they had no telescope.

The large native craft seemed to be manned by a very big crew, for crowds of dark, blue-clad figures could be seen moving about her deck, while many others were visible on board the *Saracen*. Sampans, or native boats, were continually going to and fro between the two vessels, and as the boys watched they saw case after case handed out of the hold of the wreck and transhipped into the smaller craft waiting alongside, which then went to the junk and had their contents hoisted out. From where they were the yelling of the working Chinamen seemed alarmingly close, and neither of them dared talk above a whisper.

"The thieves—the beastly thieves!" muttered Roger angrily. "They're stealing our cargo. Can't we stop em?"

The Boy Castaways

"How can we?" said Billy ruefully. "There are at least fifty of 'em there, and if we resisted they'd simply murder us!"

"We could blaze away at 'em with the rifle," suggested Roger. "How many cartridges did you——?"

"For heaven's sake don't!" exclaimed Billy. "It would be no good at all—simply asking for trouble. Even supposing we did kill a few of 'em—and it's not likely at this range, for neither of us are very good shots—the others would take jolly good care not to let us off."

"No; I suppose that's true."

"Besides," continued Billy, "I've only twenty cartridges; and what's to happen when they're all fired? That gun of yours is no good at anything over sixty yards."

"No," grumbled Roger, "I suppose it isn't. How long d'you think they've been there? Dirty robbers!"

"Don't know any more than you do. I expect they turned up while we were messing about in the wood."

"Well, what had we better do?"

"Stay where we are and let 'em take all they want," urged Billy with sound common sense. "They may think there's nobody on the island, and sail away without landing at all. You see," he explained, "there's a lot of cargo in that hold, and it'll pretty well fill the junk up, besides what they've got on board already."

"But they're bound to see the hut and dinghy."

"I doubt it. The hut's practically invisible from where they are on account of the palms, and the boat's up stream where we dragged her the other night. I think, too," he went on, "that if they ever intended landing they'd have done it already, and it's rather a good thing we were out of the way."

"D'you think they'd attack us if they knew we were here?"

"I doubt if they would, unless we tried to stop 'em looting. All these junk people are pirates, though, if they get half a chance, and a wreck doesn't often come their way. If we tried to stop 'em they wouldn't stick at anything, and would simply kill us offhand."

"Ugh! What beasts they are!" muttered the other with a shudder.

"Yes," continued Billy, "nearly all Chinamen are pirates at heart. I remember Mr. Hardcastle telling me of a case where a steamer ran ashore on the mainland."

"What happened?" asked Roger, feeling interested.

"Well, she piled up, and the junks crowded round her in next to no time and started looting the cargo, and the English officers fired on them to stop it. The result was, every soul on board was murdered, passengers and all. A gunboat came along and drove 'em off eventually and killed a good many, but all the people on board the steamer had been killed all right."

"I wish to goodness a gunboat would come here," murmured Roger apprehensively, for he was harrowed by Billy's gruesome story. "There's not a blessed thing in sight though!" he added, gazing wistfully round the horizon.

"Cheer up, let's hope for the best!" said Billy consolingly, for he noticed from Roger's face that he was slowly becoming obsessed by a fit of depression.

The other boy growled something unintelligible under his breath.

"We're not dead yet!" urged Billy, desperately anxious to drive the moody expression from his companion's face. "Not by a long chalk! Ha, ha!" he laughed forcedly.

The afternoon wore on, but to the watchers on the hill the hours seemed to pass with leaden-footed monotony. The heat was intense, for the fierce rays of the blazing sun beat down on the little plateau until the blood felt as

The Boy Castaways

if it was boiling in their veins, and though the sea breeze certainly afforded some relief, its gentle airs could not altogether counteract the entire absence of shade.

It seemed hours and hours that they lay on the turf, taking occasional pulls at the water bottles to alleviate their intense thirst, and though every now and then one or the other of them would fall off into a doze with head pillow'd on outstretched arms, proper sleep was out of the question.

Throughout the whole period the Chinese were hard at work removing the cargo which remained in the wreck, and it must have been about seven o'clock that Billy noticed the junk was hoisting her brown sails.

"Roger!" he exclaimed, pushing his companion, who was dozing by his side. "Roger, I say, wake up, I believe she's off!"

It was true, for presently they saw the Chinese leave the *Saracen* and return to their own vessel, and soon, having hoisted the sails on all four masts, the men in the junk began to weigh the anchor. The sound of their yelling chorus was distinctly audible, and before long the ungainly craft began to turn. Her sails bellied out to the evening breeze, and moving slowly through the water she stood off to the eastward.

"Thank goodness!" remarked Roger, fingering the rifle, for he would have dearly loved to send a parting shot after the marauders. "Thank goodness they've——"

"Look at the *Saracen*!" suddenly interrupted Billy. "I believe they've set her alight!"

A column of thin blue vapour seemed to be ascending from the fore hatch of the wreck, and as they watched it it gradually thickened until, five minutes later, a dense cloud of black smoke suddenly burst from the ill-fated ship and drifted rapidly to leeward.

"The beasts!" cried Roger. "Why on earth did they

want to burn her? Give us a cartridge." He reached out his hand.

"No," said Billy firmly, snatching the rifle away. "It won't do any good if you fire at 'em now."

Roger, speechless with rage, watched the poor ship, and before long it became obvious to both boys that the conflagration had gained a firm hold, for the ever-increasing clouds of black smoke were soon accompanied by showers of sparks and tongues of vivid red flame. It was quite evident, too, that the fire had been kindled intentionally, for though it must have been visible to those on board the junk they made no effort to return. By sunset the Chinese were about four miles off the island, and as there was now little chance of their being seen, the boys made their way down the hill. By the time they reached the beach the remains of the wreck were blazing furiously, and soon afterwards the bowsprit burnt through and fell into the water with a crash and in a shower of sparks.

Absolutely nothing could be done to save her, and going to the hut Billy looked round to see if he could discover any traces of the Chinamen having landed. To his surprise and satisfaction, however, nothing had been touched, for the door of the little dwelling was still locked, the dinghy lay safe in the stream, while the piles of canvas, cordage, spars, stores, and other things salved from the ship lay on the beach exactly as they had been left in the morning when the boys set out. Taking some biscuits, for he was desperately hungry, and knew Roger must be the same, he returned to his companion on the beach.

"I don't think they've landed," he announced. "Nothing's been touched so far as I can see."

"Thank goodness for that!" muttered Roger thankfully.

When at length the fading colours of the sunset gave way to the darkness of night the blazing ship afforded a

magnificent spectacle. Fanned by the breeze the lurid tongues of flame leapt into the air, and one by one the stout timbers burnt through and collapsed in showers of sparks. Billowing volumes of dense black smoke, dyed a dull red with the gleam of the conflagration, drifted slowly to leeward and blotted out the glittering array of stars on the horizon. The sheen converted the rippling sea into a shimmering expanse of ruby-orange light as the forks of flame leapt and played about the dry woodwork of the hull, while overhead the deep blue of the heavens was stained with a ruddy glare in which the stars themselves were invisible. Roaring, crashing, and crackling, the noise of the fire was terrific, and the air was full of the pungent smell of burning wood.

Suddenly, towards midnight, a gigantic fork of flame and a shower of sparks leapt high into the air, and hanging for an instant, vanished with a loud crash of falling timber. The wreck seemed to have been split asunder, and with a loud hissing noise as the blazing masses fell into the water, the sea suddenly became darkened and the smoke began to dissolve. Wreathing eddies of white steam, through which showed the dull red glow of one or two still smouldering timbers, overhung the scene of the disaster, but presently even this had disappeared, and nothing except the smell of burning remained to show what had occurred.

The tragedy was complete; the unfortunate *Saracen* had been converted into a mass of blackened timber circling round the iron-shod reef with the wash of the tide, and feeling more lonely and miserable than ever at the final destruction of their former home, the poor castaways crept back to their hut for the night.



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ANCHORED CLOSE TO THE SUBMERGED REEF WAS AN ENORMOUS
CHINESE JUNK

CHAPTER VIII

Hill Fort

“BILL!”

“Hallo?”

“D’you think there’s any chance of those chaps coming back?”

“Don’t know,” answered Billy, poking with a fork at the fish sizzling in the frying-pan for breakfast. “Why d’you ask?”

“Oh, nothing much. I was only thinking that if they did it would be a pretty rotten lookout for us.”

“Yes, it would,” agreed the other, taking the pan off the stove and ladling its cooked contents on to two plates. “I really think we ought to do something in case they do come back. You might pour out the coffee,” he added. “It ought to be ready by now.”

Roger did so, and before long the boys were sitting on the ground intent upon their morning meal.

“Well, what d’you think we’d better do?” asked Billy at length, after taking the edge off his appetite.

“What about living on the hill?”

“What, and leave the hut?”

The other nodded. “It would be far safer,” he remarked.

“Rather a pity, as we’ve taken so much trouble over building it,” answered Billy. “Besides,” he went on, “we’d be such a long way from the water.”

“Yes, that’s the worst of it; but couldn’t we take it up there as we wanted it?”

The Boy Castaways

"We could take it up in casks, of course," said Billy, "and have enough up there to last us for a fortnight, say, and then there's a tent of sorts to sleep in, and the rifles and food."

"'Um!" observed Roger, remembering their experience of the previous afternoon. "A tent would be baking hot."

"I should jolly well think it would!" laughed Billy. "Look here," he added, "why shouldn't we go on living in the hut and make a regular fort on top of the hill which we could bolt to if they do come back. We could hump the rifles and stuff up there a little at a time, and with all those boulders it ought to be a pretty easy place to defend."

"How about the water?" put in Roger.

"Take it up in those small casks we brought ashore," answered the other. "They're all empty."

"They'll be beastly heavy," grumbled the other, thinking of the boulders.

"I'm afraid it's the only way, my dear chap," said Billy. "We'll just have to sweat 'em up one at a time. There's no other way that I can think of."

He went on with his breakfast, and as he munched the bread fruit his gaze wandered towards the reef where one solitary blackened timber, standing perpendicularly out of the water, alone showed where the *Saracen* had been. Not another vestige of the unfortunate ship appeared, and as he looked out across the sea Billy again began to feel the sensations of despair he had experienced the night before. The *Saracen* had gone for ever, and he felt as if he had been suddenly struck dumb, for a vague sense of fear and a feeling of utter loneliness seemed to overpower him completely. He wondered to himself if a ship would ever come to take them away. Sometimes, when he felt like this, it seemed so very improbable, but yet, on the other hand, the men of the *Endeavour* had been rescued, so why should they not be? He derived a certain amount of relief from

the knowledge that others besides themselves had been cast upon the island, and that they had eventually been rescued. But supposing he and his companion were doomed to stay here for ever? The possibility was too awful to contemplate.

"I say," suddenly burst out Roger, "I've got a ripping idea. You know that place we saw in the wood yesterday where the side of the hill came down like a precipice."

"Yes," said Billy slowly, putting aside his thoughts.

"Couldn't we fix up a pulley of some kind and hoist all the heavy stuff up?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed the other, "why not? Rig up a spar on top of the hill, you mean, so that it'll overhang the precipice?"

"Yes, that's the giddy idea," cried Roger, rather pleased at his own cleverness in thinking of it. "Lash a block to the end of the spar, and reeve a rope through the block."

"We'll have a shot at it," replied the other, "and if it works—and I see no reason why it shouldn't—it'll save us no end of trouble. It was jolly cute of you to think of it. We'll call it the Wedderburn Patent Elevator," he added with a laugh. "Sounds rather well, doesn't it?"

After finishing their meal they crossed the stream and set off along the beach to look for a suitable spar. It would have to be light, so that they could carry it up the hill, and going along the water's edge they came to the spot where they knew a portion of the *Saracen's* main topgallant mast had been washed ashore. It had lain there since the wreck, for they had found it too heavy to move; and though the mast itself was badly split, having been broken off short when the vessel struck, the royal and topgallant yards, with all their rigging, running gear, and the tattered remains of the sails, were still attached.

"This might do," remarked Billy, pointing to the royal yard, a spar about thirty feet long lying under the mast

and with one end firmly driven into the sand. "Roger, nip back to the hut and bring a saw and axe; we'll have to cut all this stuff clear."

The tools were soon forthcoming, and he set to work cutting clear the tangled mass of cordage.

"Now," he ordered, flinging down his weapon, "lay hold of this end."

Roger did so.

"One, two, three, haul!"

They pulled together with all their strength, but the spar was so embedded in sand that their united efforts would not budge it.

"We can't do it!" exclaimed Roger at last, panting with his exertions. "The bally thing's stuck fast!"

"Let's cut it in half," suggested Billy.

"Good idea!" cried Roger, taking the saw and beginning to sever the spar where it joined the mast. "As a matter of fact," he went on to say between the strokes, "I don't think we could have carried the whole of it up the hill; it's a pretty hefty bit of wood."

While Roger was busy, Billy went along to where they had stacked all the heavier things brought ashore from the wreck. He remembered having seen a coil of brand-new rope, thin but very strong, and finding it rolled it down to the beach to where his companion was at work. He then procured the necessary block, and by the time he came back with this the spar was in two pieces.

Putting the severed portion through the coil of rope, they hoisted it on to their shoulders without much difficulty and trudged off along the beach on their way up the hill. The day was broiling hot, but after an hour's hard work, for their burden was heavy enough to make frequent rests necessary, they reached the summit. Here the spar was wedged with its thick end under two huge boulders, so that the other extremity, which carried the block with the

rope running through it, overhung the sheer slope. Uncoiling the line, they paid it out until one end rested on the ground in the valley below, and then, making a knot so that it would not unreeve through the block, tumbled the rest of the coil over the precipice. It went crashing down, its weight carrying it through the few stunted bushes and shrubs which grew in the side of the cliff, and having done this they went back to the hut for dinner, well satisfied with the morning's work.

Two hours later the lift was in proper working order, for Billy had cut off enough of the rope, and, thanks to Mr. Hardcastle's teaching, had succeeded in joining the two ends together in a "long splice". He had now what sailors would call an endless whip or pulley reaching from the top of the hill to the valley, and it would be a matter of comparative ease to transport the necessary things through the wood and to hoist them to the summit of the hill.

By the end of the day two small casks of water and half a dozen cases of biscuit and tinned meat had been hauled to the top of the hill, Roger remaining on the summit to unfasten them when they arrived; and though pulling on the rope was very hard work in the great heat, it was far and away easier than carrying the boxes and cases up the hill on their shoulders. Sometimes they had difficulty when the heavier things swung in to the cliff and got entangled in the bushes, but on the whole the work went on without serious intermission.

The next day they continued their labours, and by noon sufficient food and water to last them for a considerable time had been stored on the summit. What now remained to be done was to transform the plateau into a fort. The little grass-grown patch was admirably suited for purposes of defence, and beyond having to move a few boulders to form a complete breastwork round its edge, to protect them

from rifle fire in case the hill was attacked, the work was comparatively easy. The spaces between the boulders were filled in with tightly rammed earth, to keep out any bullets which might find their way through; and when three days later a small shelter tent had been erected and four of the rifles and the greater portion of the ammunition had been brought up from the hut, Hill Fort, as they christened it, was finished.

"Well," said Billy, glancing round, "I don't think anyone'll capture that in a hurry."

"No," agreed Roger; "I don't think they will. At any rate, we couldn't have pitched upon a better place."

What he said was perfectly true, for a reference to the map will show that Hill Fort dominated the whole island. Its western face, being absolutely precipitous, could not be negotiated by any human being unless he had the agility of a monkey; and though the slopes in other directions were more gradual, their ascent was sufficiently difficult, as the boys themselves had found on more than one occasion. The large boulders scattered over the hillside would afford, it is true, a certain amount of cover to any men attacking the summit; but there were no folds in the ground which would afford protection to a large number of the enemy, and as the rifles from the fort would command practically every inch of the ground, the boys had every hope of being able to repel an attack if such a thing ever took place.

"To-morrow," suggested Billy that evening after supper, "I vote we sail round the island in the dinghy. It'll be quite a decent change after being ashore for so long."

"I vote we do," agreed his companion, busy slinging his hammock for the night. "We've worked like niggers over the fort, and I think it's high time we had a spell."

CHAPTER IX

More Discoveries

IT was high water when, early the next morning, the boys began to make their preparations for the circumnavigation of the island. They loaded the boat with sufficient food and water to last them for the day, and then, putting their firearms and a certain amount of ammunition on board, dragged her down the stream and across the shallows at its entrance. The dinghy, luckily, was provided with a short mast and ordinary lugsail, and as these had always been kept lashed to the thwarts they were still in place when she had been washed bottom upwards on the beach. It was a beautiful day, with a fine breeze from the north-east, not too fresh, but just strong enough to make sailing exciting work; and as the latter method of progression would be infinitely more pleasant than tugging at the oars, they decided to use the sail. Clambering on board, the mast was soon stepped in place, and shoving the boat off from the beach, Billy took his place at the tiller in the stern.

“All ready?” he asked.

Roger nodded.

“All right, hoist away!”

Roger hauled on the halliards and the sail crept to the masthead. It flapped in the wind, but Billy seized the sheet and took a half-turn round a cleat, and the minute he did so the canvas filled and the tubby little boat dashed off at a fine rate.

"Sit well up to windward!" shouted the coxswain, for the lee gunwale was perilously near the water's edge. "We don't want to capsize!"

Roger laughed. "By George," he exclaimed, as the whiffs of spray leapt over the weather bow, "this is fine!"

The sea was not really rough, but Billy at the tiller was too intent upon his steering to reply. He was having a certain amount of difficulty, for the dinghy, not having been built for sailing, would not lie up within six points of the wind, and sidled to leeward like a crab. Still, she travelled along in fine style, and Boulder Point was soon close on the lee bow.

It was their intention, on account of the quarter from which the wind blew, to sail round the island in the contrary direction to the hands of a clock, and on their way they had decided to land on the western portion, which hitherto had remained unexplored. Rounding Boulder Point without difficulty they sailed off along the western coast, and as they were now under the lee of the land the wind was not so strong, and Billy had more time to look about him.

"That seems a good place to land," he remarked at length, pointing over the port bow towards a shallow indentation in the coast.

He was looking at the spot they had christened Gosling Beach, after the boy of the *Endeavour*, whose name they had seen punched on the copper attached to the ficus; and certainly it did seem an ideal spot to disembark, for it was quite sheltered from the wind, and the calm water lapped gently against the white sandy shore with hardly a ripple.

"Yes," agreed Roger, looking at it. "I don't think we could do better than that if we're going to have a look at this part of the island."

"Right you are!" said Billy, putting the tiller over and

heading the boat for the shore. "Stand by to let go the halliards when I sing out."

Roger cast them off and held the end ready in his hand.

"Let go!" shouted the coxswain.

The sail fluttered down with a run as the bows of the dinghy crunched against the shore, and taking the end of the painter in his hand, Roger leapt out. Billy followed with an oar, and sticking the latter in the sand, secured the boat so that she would not drift away on the tide.

"Now," he said, as they passed through the fringe of coconut palms which grew above high-water mark, "which way had we better go?" He halted irresolutely.

"Let's go and have a look at that place we called Hardcastle Bay," suggested Roger.

"Come on, then;" and shouldering their weapons they trudged off to the southward.

The gently undulating ground across which they now advanced was covered ankle deep with dry, powdery sand, and though round about high-water mark there were a few coconuts and other palms, here, farther inland, there were nothing but occasional areas of thick coarse grass and bush. The growth, too, owing to the lack of water, was not nearly so luxuriant as in the other portion of the island, while the plants seemed to struggle for a precarious existence in the barren soil, for they were dried up and withered until their foliage was almost the same colour as the sand itself.

"I don't think much of this place," remarked Billy dubiously, stopping and looking round him. "Never saw such a bloomin' wilderness in my life. My shoes are chock-a-block with sand, too!"

"So are mine," replied Roger. "I vote we stick it, though; we're halfway across by now, and the bay can't be very far ahead. Come on!" he urged.

They trudged on in silence, for the going was so bad

that every movement seemed an effort, and they had no energy left to talk. The sand, too, got softer and more powdery as they progressed, and at each step their legs had to be lifted straight up before they could be swung forward from the knee for the next pace. The sun, too, was blazing in the sky above, and the perspiration poured in streams down their faces and necks; but in spite of it they struggled on manfully.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Billy suddenly, as he wearily topped a small rise in the ground and looked over into the dip beyond. "What are those stones there? They look as if someone had piled 'em up on purpose."

He pointed at what looked like a small cairn about four feet high lying in the centre of the circular depression in front of him.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Roger. "They must have been put up by somebody, but what on earth for, I wonder?"

They ran on as fast as they could, and were presently examining the mysterious-looking pile. It was obvious that it had been made by human agency, and that, moreover, the stones of which it was built had been carried to their present position from some beach; for though they varied in size they were all rounded and waterworn by the action of the waves. The ground in the vicinity, too, was absolutely destitute of boulders, while none had been seen since leaving the boat. But why some person or persons unknown should have chosen such a strange and inconspicuous spot for the erection of a cairn, and why he or they should have gone to all the trouble of carrying the heavy stones inland from the beach was a mystery.

"I can't make it out," said Billy, scratching his head, with a perplexed expression on his face. "Why on earth should anyone want to put a cairn here? Here, of all places, where it can't be seen more than fifty yards! We didn't

even spot it from the top of the hill!" He glanced at the hilltop, clearly outlined against the blue of the sky.

"It was probably put up to mark something," suggested Roger lamely.

"Course it was, fathead, but what does it mark?"

Roger simply looked puzzled and made no reply.

The pile was built up in the form of a rough pyramid, and bending down, Billy began to scoop out a cavity at its base. He unearthed, as he thought he would, two more layers of stones at the bottom of the cairn which had been buried, and this proved conclusively that it had originally been six or seven feet high, but that in the course of time the ground level had been naturally raised by the sand being silted up by the wind.

"We'd better pull the thing to bits," he remarked. "There may be something inside it."

They started to cast stones aside one by one, examining the uncovered spots carefully for any trace of a tin or a bottle which might possibly contain a document. After an hour's hard work, for some of the stones were very heavy, and had become firmly wedged by the sand filtering in through the spaces, the bottom layer of the pyramid lay uncovered before them, but not a sign or a trace of anything had they discovered.

"It's jolly funny," said Billy perplexedly. "There's not a blessed thing inside it, and why anyone should be fool enough to build the thing for fun I'm blowed if I know. It's—hallo!" he broke off, "what's that you chucked away?"

Roger, who had been grubbing about, had flung something aside which was certainly not a stone. Billy stepped over and picked it up.

"Bamboo," he said, looking at it carefully. "Quite rotten, too," for a flake had fallen off when he touched it.

The Boy Castaways

"So it is," said his companion. "Half a jiffy, though; perhaps there's something inside."

Billy opened his knife and slit it in two longitudinally. "No, not a thing," he said disappointedly, with the two halves in his hand. "But look here," he added an instant later, with a thoughtful look on his face. "D'you see the bottom of it is quite level where it's been cut?"

"Yes, and the other end's all rotten; but what of it?"

"Well, it accounts for the cairn," declared Billy. "There was a flagstaff here once upon a time—pretty long ago from the look of it—and who ever put it up piled stones round it to prevent it being blown down. D'you follow?"

"You're quite a Sherlock Holmes," said Roger slowly. "How d'you make it all out?"

"Fathead!" laughed Billy. "Don't you see? The wood wouldn't last for ever, and in the course of time it rotted through, and down came the bloomin' flagstaff. This," he went on, holding out the pieces in his hand, "was the butt end of it. When the flagstaff fell, some of it was left in the cairn, but it rotted away gradually from the top, and down below, where it was covered up in sand, and the air and water couldn't get at it, it remained more or less sound. D'you see now?"

"Um, yes," said Roger rather doubtfully. "I think I do."

"I don't believe you do," said Billy; "but just to prove that what I said is right I vote we have a look for the broken-off part. It can't be very far away."

They set to work, digging with their hands, and before they had been at it ten minutes, Roger let rip a loud yell. "I've got it!" he shouted excitedly, tugging at something which gave way at once and precipitated him on his back. Billy darted across and saw he had, without a doubt, discovered the other portion of the bamboo. It, too, was

rotten with age, but they were soon busy digging it out with their fingers.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Billy a little later, "there's something made of iron here. Come and give us a hand."

Quivering with excitement they shovelled the sand away, and before long had hauled the object clear.

It was an enormous arrowhead, cut out of sheet copper—not iron, as Billy had thought—and measuring fully three feet from side to side. It had evidently once been lashed to the top of the staff, for one or two strands of decayed rope still encircled the shaft and secured it to what remained of the rotting bamboo.

"A broad arrow, by gum!" exclaimed Roger in amazement. "That's the Government mark, isn't it?"

Billy nodded. "Yes," he assented. "I expect the *Endeavour's* men surveyed the island and put it up here as a mark. I've often seen broad arrows cut into those stone things at home, and I know they've got something to do with the people who make maps—ordnance surveyors I think they're called." He was thinking of the "bench marks" bearing a broad arrow and a number which are frequently seen in Great Britain. They are used in connection with the triangulation process when the ground is being surveyed for map-making purposes, and the symbols are either cut into a convenient wall, or the side of a building, or on small stone pillars, something like diminutive milestones.

"The thing's been painted over," announced Roger, bending down and scraping it with his knife. "Black paint, too."

"Black!" exclaimed his companion excitedly. "A black arrow! D'you remember the name of that pirate ship the *Endeavour* was chasing when she ran ashore?"

"Whew!" whistled Roger. "Do I not? D'you really

think," he continued in an awed voice, "that this was put up by the pirates?" The mere mention of the word thrilled him to the very marrow, but now that they had come upon something which might be the handiwork of the black-bearded pistolled ruffians he had so often heard about, he began to feel the hair rising on his head. He felt half petrified inside, as if he had seen a ghost.

Billy was very perplexed, and thought for a minute before making any further remark. "It's a jolly funny coincidence, jolly funny!" he said at length. "Really, I don't know what to think. If this thing was put up by the *Endeavour's* people, why should they have pitched on a black arrow? But then again," he went on, "they must have done it. The pirates never landed here, so far as we know."

"No, the copper plate certainly said nothing about it," said Roger. "The thing's a blooming mystery," he added, "and I don't suppose we shall ever find out what it means, or who put it up."

"No, I don't expect we shall," agreed the other. "Come on, though; we've spent a long time pokin' about here, so I think it's high time we made a move. We may find something else on the way."

They resumed their weary progress to the southward, and soon afterwards arrived at Hardcastle Bay without having seen anything out of the ordinary. The bay, they found, was in no way peculiar, being merely a rather deep indentation in the low sandy coast about three hundred yards across from point to point, but it was nearly midday by the time they reached it, and as they had breakfasted early they were both extraordinarily hungry.

"My tummy," announced Billy, rubbing that portion of his anatomy, "feels as if it was flapping against my backbone, and I'm pining for something to drink." They had not brought their water bottles with them, and he looked

round for any signs of a stream, but there was nothing except sand all round them.

"I feel pretty empty, too," said Roger, "and I've a horrible thirst. I'm all for going back to the boat, where we can get something. There's nothing to stay here for."

"All right! I vote we do, and let's go back along the shore. It's firmer, and we'll get there far quicker than by trampin' across that horrible loose stuff."

They walked back to Gosling Beach along the harder sand near the shore, and soon reached the boat. In their absence the tide had gone down and had left her high and dry, and securing the food, they ate their meal under the shade of the coconut palms above high-water mark. They both felt better when they had finished, and launching the boat, a matter of some difficulty, rehoisted the sail and resumed the cruise round the island. Passing by Hardcastle Bay, the mangrove swamp, and Cape Martin without attempting to land, they put the boat about and steered to the northward along the eastern shore of the island. Here they no longer had the land between them and the wind, but the breeze seemed to have died down since the morning, and although the boat slipped through the water at a good pace, Billy found the steering quite easy, and consequently had plenty of time to look about him.

He had never really been an admirer of scenery ashore—boys seldom are—but there was something in the view before him, a vague indefinable something, which made it more than beautiful. The island, with its vivid tropical colouring, seemed, somehow, so clean looking and so utterly unspoilt by the handiwork of men. No unsightly edifices marred its clear outline, and nature ran riot in its own way, for the place showed no signs that it had ever been inhabited by human beings.

The boat was abreast of Codrington Bay, the upper portion of whose yellow beach gleamed in the strong glare

of the afternoon sun. But down by the water's edge, where the wash of the sea had wetted the foreshore, the sand shone like a mirror, and this dazzling but harmonious mixture of gold and silver formed a complete and welcome contrast to the sombre blue-grey and red-brown of the coast. Behind the cliffs themselves the gaunt yellow-green shape of the hill, its slopes punctuated here and there with drab-coloured boulders and patches of dark-green scrub, stood out abruptly against the pure turquoise of the sky. Close by, on the starboard bow of the dinghy, lay Evans Island, its grey cliffs surmounted by the bulbous summit of deep-green vegetation; while farther away were the Hare's Ears, their pointed shapes stabbing the pale sky on the horizon, and the sapphire sea churning itself into creamy foam round their bases.

"Bill!" cried Roger suddenly.

"Hallo, what's up?"

"D'you see that grey patch on the cliff just under the dip?" Roger was pointing at the southern portion of the beach in Codrington Bay.

"Yes," said Billy, "I see what you mean."

"Well, a little to the left of that, and just by that dark-coloured rock on the beach, d'you see a dark patch?"

"What," asked Billy, "d'you mean in the corner, as it were, just where the cliff starts to jut out into the sea, right down on the beach?"

"Yes," said Roger. "I don't mind betting my boots that's a cave. I've been watching it, and it's been the same colour the whole time. It can't be a shadow."

"We might have a look at it then," said Billy. "We've got heaps of time." He put the helm over as he spoke, and eased the sheet, so that the boat headed towards the beach. "Stand by the sail!"

They effected a landing without difficulty, and while Billy stayed behind to secure the painter to a large stone

to prevent the boat drifting away, his companion ran on up the beach towards the entrance to the cave.

Billy was still busy when he heard a yell behind him. "Bill! Come here!" Roger's voice sounded as if he was frightened at something, and breaking into a run Billy dashed up the shingle and found his companion gazing intently at something scratched into the wall of smooth grey rock just inside the entrance to the sandy-floored cave.

The inscription, for such it was, had been rather discoloured by the process of time, and by water trickling down from above, but on looking at it closely, Billy saw an enormous arrowhead cut deeply into the rock. It was almost an exact facsimile of the one they had unearthed a few hours before.

Underneath it, in rude, ill-shaped letters, was scratched the following inscription:—

BRIG *BLACK ARROW*

1825

while below this again there was a species of crest.

It was badly worn, but on examining it closely he felt a thrill run through his whole body.

It was a rude drawing of a grinning skull, but instead of the proverbial crossbones, two arrows, their shafts crossing over the forehead, pointed out through the eye sockets of the horrible object.

It made him feel quite frightened, and looking at Roger he saw that he too was nervous, for his face was unnaturally pale, and he cast anxious glances into the dark recesses of the cavern, as if every second he expected a dark-bearded pirate to leap out into the sunlight flourishing a blood-stained cutlass.

"I don't like this at all," faltered Roger in a whisper.

"Nor do I," said Billy softly; "it gives me the creeps!"

“Let’s bunk!”

“Let’s!”

They fled down the beach together in sheer unreasoning panic, casting terrified glances over their shoulders as if they expected to be pursued; and they were not content until they had tumbled into the boat and were rowing away from the spot for all they were worth. They were too frightened even to think of hoisting the sail, and it was not until they had left the beach several hundred yards behind that the silence was broken.

“Roger,” said Billy rather sheepishly, for he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself, “we are a pair of fools! Just fancy being in a funk over a thing like that!”

“It was pretty beastly, though,” protested the other. “I didn’t half like it.”

“Nor did I, not a bit,” agreed Billy truthfully, pulling at his oar. “But we are silly idiots all the same. After all, 1825 is fairly long ago, and if there is anything in the cave, it’s not likely to be alive. Why did we bunk, I wonder?”

“That skull did for me,” admitted Roger.

There was silence for a minute or two.

“Well,” remarked Billy at length, “we’ve discovered one thing, at any rate.”

“What?”

“That that beacon we found this morning had something to do with the pirates.”

“D’you think so?”

“I’m almost dead certain. It was a black arrow, and almost exactly the same size and shape as the one scratched on the wall of the cave.”

“But the *Endeavour* people——” began Roger.

“The *Endeavour* people,” interrupted Billy, “would hardly put up a thing a dead spit of the one in the cave, would they?”

"No," said Roger, "I suppose they wouldn't. But there's another thing which is rather rummy."

"What's that?"

"The *Endeavour* was wrecked here in 1823, wasn't she?"
Billy nodded.

"Well," continued Roger, "according to that thing in the cave, the *Black Arrow* came here again in 1825, two years afterwards."

"Um!" said Billy, "that's true. There's something precious funny about the whole affair. Everything on this island seems to be mixed up in the most extraordinary way. First, there was the copper thing saying the *Endeavour* was wrecked here while chasing the *Black Arrow*. Then there was that arrow we found this morning—which must have some connection with the pirates—and now we've found this drawing of another arrow with the name of the ship and the date underneath it. They seemed jolly fond of advertising themselves, and I'm blowed if I can understand it at all."

"I call it jolly uncanny. I expect we'll be seeing their ghosts next," said Roger, with an attempt at a laugh.

"I hope not; that would just about finish me off. There's one thing we must do, though."

"What?"

"Explore the cave," said Billy. "We may find something inside."

"Ugh, I don't like the idea of going near it again!"

"Nor do I at present," admitted Billy, "but we'll feel all right in a day or two. We'll take lanterns with us and do the thing properly. You don't know what a rotten funk I feel for bolting like that."

"No, I suppose we were fools, but it was horribly frightening."

They both came to the conclusion that they had explored

quite enough for one day, and as the afternoon was now drawing on, they hoisted the sail to the favouring breeze with the idea of going straight back to the hut.

Passing close by the Hare's Ears, the crevices and ledges in whose precipitous sides evidently afforded nesting places for the thousands of sea birds which circled and wheeled round the sheer cliffs, they rounded Point Wedderburn and sailed into the calm waters of Salvation Bay.

It felt very good to be home again after the episode of the cave, and before long the boat had been moored up the stream, and preparations for the evening meal were being made.

Once again the glowing ball of the sun sank to rest in a blaze of glory, and once more the shimmering colour slowly gave way to the soft velvety darkness as night came down upon the island. The restless sea in the little cove rose and fell so noiselessly that it seemed to be asleep, but the wind had evidently risen, for it soughed through the palm tops, and the booming of the waves on the reef echoed across the island in a low reverberating thunder.

The two castaways turned in early enough, but for a long time they lay awake talking, for though they were both tired, their minds were still full of the events of the day. At length, however, weariness asserted itself, and they both fell asleep, Billy to dream of nothing but pirates—dark-bearded, sea-booted ruffians, armed with long cutlasses, and with awful-looking pistols stuck in their broad belts. They marched up and down the beach in single file, each with a long bamboo over his shoulder, to the end of which was fastened an enormous black arrowhead.

The strange procession seemed very realistic, for he could distinctly hear the crunch of their feet on the shingle as they marched in step. He did not feel in the least frightened either, but the most peculiar part of the whole thing was that their faces all seemed dimly familiar. He

looked at them closely as they went by, and saw, to his surprise, that they had suddenly become clean shaven.

He looked at them again, and there was absolutely no doubt about it. The leader was Captain Wedderburn himself, while behind him walked Mr. Hardcastle and the steward, and then came all the remainder of the *Saracen's* crew. How absurd it all seemed!

"Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch," went their feet.

Suddenly Billy realized he was half awake, for he found himself staring straight up out of his hammock at the oblong skylight now flooded with the silver light of the risen moon. Across it strange nebulous shapes, cast by the shadows of the palm foliage overhead, twisted and contorted themselves so that the glass looked like a piece of beautifully woven lace, whose delicate pattern waved to and fro until the strands assumed an infinite number of wonderful designs. It was very pretty, he thought to himself, and he must really—

"Crunch, crunch, crunch, thud, thud!" Whatever was that? Surely the pirates were not marching still? The sound of their feet seemed so very real somehow, and he knew he had only been dreaming. Was he still asleep? he wondered. He rubbed his eyes and turned over in his hammock to look at the door, which had been left wide open for the sake of coolness.

He gave a gasp of horror, and his heart thumped against his ribs, for there, silhouetted clearly in the patch of silvery light, was an enormous black figure peering into the hut!

CHAPTER X

Captured

FOR a second or two Billy gazed at the motionless figure in absolute terror, vainly endeavouring to attract the attention of the still sleeping Roger. Somehow he seemed bereft of speech, and the words would not come. Then the figure disappeared, and a second or two later he found his voice.

“Roger, Roger!” he called softly, with his head turned towards the door in case the intruder should reappear.

“What’s the row about now?” said the other sleepily. “Why can’t you let a fellow get——?”

“Roger!” whispered Billy. “There was a man in the doorway a minute ago!”

“What?” ejaculated Roger, sitting up in his hammock and looking towards the door. “What rot you do talk! There’s nothing there now.”

Billy rubbed his eyes, wondering whether or not he had been dreaming.

“I’ll swear there was someone there,” he said slowly.

“Don’t believe it,” laughed the other. “You simply imagined it. You’ve eaten something that doesn’t agree with you.”

“I’ll swear there was somebody there, but whether it was a man or a——”

“Or a what?” guffawed Roger.

“Ghost!” said Billy.

"D'you really think so?" asked his companion in an awed whisper, for he was beginning to understand from Billy's manner that he really had seen something.

"Well, I'm going to have a look, anyway," said Billy, jumping out of his hammock. "You'd better come too. Where are the rifles?"

"In the corner there," answered Roger, tumbling out. "There's a box of ammunition open."

They groped about in the semi-darkness and found the weapons, and stuffing some cartridges into the magazines crept silently out of the hut. At first they could see nothing, for though the moon was bright, the trunks of the palms shut out their view of the cove; but going on, they soon came to the edge of the little plantation.

"Lie down!" muttered Billy, flinging himself flat on the ground, for there, anchored in the middle of the little bay, and with her dark hull, masts, and rigging clearly visible in the flood of silvery moonlight, was a large Chinese junk!

Billy rubbed his eyes to make certain that he was not dreaming, for he could not understand how she could have anchored without waking them; but there was absolutely no doubt about it, for a couple of sampans were drawn up on the beach close to the water's edge.

Looking to the left, they could see a number of dark forms close to the place where they had piled the things salved from the wreck, and presently a figure, with a large bundle on its shoulders, detached itself from the group, staggered down the beach, and deposited its burden in one of the sampans. The Chinamen, for such they evidently were, made no efforts at secrecy, for their strident conversation broke the stillness of the night.

"They're looting our stuff!" muttered Roger angrily.

"I'm afraid they are; but I wonder what's become of that fellow I saw looking into the hut?"

"He must have told his pals that it was empty," replied Roger. "At any rate they're making such a beastly row that they must think there's nobody on the island except themselves."

"What d'you think we'd better do?" whispered Billy. "It isn't much use—— For goodness' sake don't fire!" he added hurriedly, for Roger had brought his rifle to his shoulder.

He was too late, for hardly had he spoken when Roger pressed the trigger, and it was instantly followed by a sharp crack and spit of red flame from the muzzle of his weapon.

"You fool!" gasped Billy, amazed at the other's carelessness. "They're at least twenty to one, and we'll never be able to keep them off!"

The chattering ceased abruptly, and they could see the group of men staring in the direction from which the report had come. Then there was a chorus of yells, and before the boys quite realized what had happened the Chinese had drawn their knives and were rushing forward to the attack. The moonlight flashed on the blades of their murderous-looking weapons as they advanced, and realizing the utter futility of further resistance, Billy jumped to his feet.

"Come on, Roger!" he shouted excitedly, dragging his companion by the arm. "We must make a dash for the hill. Run man, run!"

They turned and fled through the tree trunks, but before they had gone five yards Roger tripped and fell headlong, his rifle falling out of his hand.

"Come on!" screamed Billy, trying to help him to rise.

"I can't," moaned Roger. "I've twisted my foot!"

Billy felt a horrible sinking sensation at his heart, for the Chinese were perilously close. His sole interest was to save his friend, and bending down he lifted the limp

body on to his shoulders, and, with the rifle in his left hand, shambled on towards the beach.

What he intended to do when he got there he never quite realized, but Roger was no light weight; progress was terribly slow, and every second brought the pursuers nearer. Before long he could hear their laboured breathing close behind him. "It's no use!" he gasped, with a catch in his voice. "I can't do it, Roger. I'm afraid they've got us!"

"Put me down and run on by yourself!" urged the other. "You'll get away all right!"

"No, no; I can't carry you any farther. I'll stick by you, though!"

He bent down and allowed the limp body of his friend to slide to the ground, and then with his rifle ready, turned round and faced his opponents.

They were barely twenty feet off, and he could see their horrible ferocious yellow faces and the awful curved knives. On they came in a rush, and lifting the weapon to his shoulder, Billy waited with the muzzle pointed at the leading man.

He pressed the trigger, but there was nothing but a feeble "click", for he had forgotten to pull back the cut-off of the magazine.

He fumbled hurriedly with the bolt, trying to remedy his omission, but it was too late, for with a bloodcurdling yell the first man was already upon him.

Seizing the rifle by the muzzle the boy used it as a club, and brought the butt down with all his strength on the horrible grinning face. The stricken Chinaman crumpled up and fell to the ground, and Billy lifted his weapon again ready for his next assailant; but before it had time to descend he felt a violent blow on the back of his head.

He had been struck by one of the enemy coming up from behind.

His head felt as if it was splitting, while his body seemed to be spinning round and round with a horrible sickening motion; he heard a sound of awful yelling, and then his knees suddenly gave way and the gyrating earth seemed to rise up and meet him.

Down, down, down, he went—then there came another sickening blow; he felt an awful sensation of pain, and fell unconscious by Roger's side.

• • • • •

It was broad daylight when he came to, and at first he had no recollection of what had occurred. His head ached and throbbed horribly, while his throat was parched, and wondering what was the matter he made an effort to move. His body, however, seemed in a very cramped position, and the slight movement wrung from him an involuntary cry of pain.

Then, in a flash, the events of the early morning surged into his brain, and opening his eyes he looked down. He found himself sitting on the ground with his arms tied behind him, while many turns of thin rope passed round his chest and lashed him securely with his back against a coconut palm. He was so tightly bound that he could only move his body a few inches in either direction, and though he was able to turn his head freely, even this slight movement hurt him, for he seemed to be covered with bruises, while his head throbbed as if there were a sledge hammer inside it, and he felt weak, sick, and dizzy.

He saw at once he was lashed to one of the palms close to where the struggle had taken place, and looking out across the bay he noticed the junk was still at anchor. From the position of the sun he judged it to be about eight o'clock in the morning. Then, attracted by the sound of chattering along the beach, he cast his eyes in that direction. About thirty blue-clad Chinamen were still at work removing articles from the heap of things the boys had

brought ashore from the wreck, but the pile had diminished in size, and as Billy watched he saw several men, with packing cases on their heads, stumble down the beach to where the sampans lay. The cases were placed on board, and their bearers returned for more; and presently, when the craft were fully loaded, some men got in and sculled them off to the waiting junk, where, with much shouting and yelling, their contents were hoisted on board. It made Billy's blood boil to see their systematic looting, but he was powerless to stop it, and turning his head, he looked round in the opposite direction.

The first thing he saw was the figure of Roger lashed to another palm trunk within six feet of him. At first Billy thought he was dead, for his head had fallen forward on his chest; but soon to his inexpressible joy he detected the slight movement of breathing.

"Roger!" he called softly, for he did not wish to attract the attention of the Chinamen. "Roger!"

The inanimate figure made no movement.

"Roger!" he repeated, rather louder this time.

"Hallo! What's up?" said the other, looking up and blinking his eyes.

"Thank goodness you're all right!" said Billy fervently. "I was afraid you were dead."

"My head hurts like sin," said Roger, "and I'm awfully stiff, but otherwise I'm all right. I came to some time ago, and have been watching you for a while, trying to wake you up. I suppose I must have gone off to sleep again."

"We're in a pretty rotten fix," remarked Billy despondently. "If you hadn't hurt your ankle we might have got to the hill all right."

"If I hadn't been such a silly fool as to fire that rifle," supplemented the other, in a gloomy voice, "I don't believe they would ever have spotted us at all."

The Boy Castaways

"It's no good worrying about that now," observed Billy, in as cheerful a voice as he could muster. "The question is, What's to be done? D'you think we can escape?"

"I don't see how we can," replied Roger mournfully. "I can't move my arms even."

"Nor can I. What d'you think we'd better do? Will they leave us here to starve?"

"I hope not," moaned Roger, with the tears welling up into his eyes. "At present I feel as if I didn't care what happened, though; my head's splitting, and I'd give anything for a drink of water."

"What happened last night after I dropped you?" asked Billy. "I got an awful crack on the head, and can't remember anything after that."

"Yes, I saw one of 'em hit you with a club or something. I tried to warn you, but I was too late. It must have been a pretty bad crack," he added; "your hair's all covered with dried blood."

"Well, what happened after I was laid out?"

"Someone caught me a thump," explained Roger, "and I don't remember any more until I woke up about an hour ago and found myself lashed to this tree. I wonder," he continued, with a shudder, "if they intend to kill us?"

"I hope not," began Billy. "It'll be——"

"'S-sh! Look out!" whispered his companion; "one of them is coming here."

Billy looked round and saw a blue-clad figure coming towards them. The man had evidently noticed them talking, for coming near he halted and surveyed the prisoners with a grin.

"B'long Engleesh?" he asked in pidgin-English, and with what seemed to be rather a friendly expression on his face.

Billy nodded.

"Why for you com' here?" demanded the man.

"Shipwreck," said Billy.

"You b'long ship man makee bu'n?"

"What does he say, Bill?" asked Roger.

"He wants to know if we belonged to the ship the junk burnt the other day, I think," explained Billy. "Yes, we belong to the ship which was burnt out there," he continued to the Chinaman, nodding his head in the direction of the reef.

"Junk man makee pilong,¹ all same pilate," observed the visitor. "My no b'long pilate. My b'long Hong-Kong side."

"I believe he's friendly," whispered Billy, feeling hopeful. "He says he's not a pirate, Roger."

"No b'long pilate," repeated the Chinaman, on hearing the word mentioned, and shaking his head vehemently. "Ulla man pilong; my b'long Ah Sing. No likee pilate; my numba' one orl lite. Fliend, you savvy, fiend?" he asked, smiling amicably.

"Friend," said Billy and Roger together.

"Fliend," reiterated the man, nodding his head. "My orl lite; ulla man," he continued, with a frown, "b'long bad man, makee kill." He drew his finger across his throat with an expressive gesture which made both boys shudder with horror.

"Can you help us to escape?" whispered Billy, aghast at the horrible pantomime the Chinaman had just gone through.

"Bime' by orl lite," said Ah Sing with a friendly smile, bending down and pretending to tighten the rope which bound Billy to the tree on seeing another man approach. "Junk makee go to-mollow time," he whispered. "Dis night ulla man sleep, Ah Sing com' makee cut lope. No talkee more," he added. "Boss man com'."

¹ Pilong = thief.

The captain of the junk, a short, sturdy-looking thickset man, clad in the usual blue cotton garments, and with a dirty bloodstained bandage round his head, came up and surveyed his prisoners with a truculent stare. He wore round his waist a leather belt, in which was stuck a broad-bladed sheath knife, and putting his thumbs into this said something to Ah Sing. The latter replied, and a conversation ensued which had evidently got something to do with the boys, for frequent glances were cast in their direction. Presently, however, the newcomer drew his knife and tested the edge of it with his thumb.

Both boys felt violently ill, for they were firmly convinced that their last moment had come. Billy shut his eyes in horror, waiting in awful suspense with his nerves tingling; but a hoarse laugh caused him to look up, and he saw the man point to the knife with a horrible grin, and then draw his finger across his throat with a gesture which could not very well be misunderstood.

The ghastly pantomime sickened Billy and Roger, but they both steeled their hearts bravely, and their faces showed nothing of the terror they felt. The Chinaman was evidently disappointed, for he probably expected the helpless prisoners to cringe and scream for mercy, and he came forward and flourished the knife within an inch of their faces. Even this brought nothing but a flicker of the eyelids to the faces of his victims, and seeing that his attempts at intimidation were hopeless he re-sheathed his weapon with a grunt and said something to Ah Sing.

“Boss man no savvy Engleesh,” interpreted the other, assuming a ferocious aspect. “He say makee kill to-morrow. My orl lite,” he went on, drawing a finger across his throat with great gusto, and as if explaining to the boys exactly how they were going to be killed. “Engleeshman no makee die; dis night Ah Sing cut lope.”

“Tell him,” said Billy to Ah Sing, “that if he does kill

us a British gunboat will blow him and his rotten junk out of the water."

Ah Sing interpreted, but the captain of the junk gave a hoarse laugh, said something in his own language, and then walked off chuckling with fiendish glee. He was apparently quite satisfied with Ah Sing's pantomime.

"Water!" gasped Billy, when he was out of earshot.
"Can you get us any water?"

"Can do," said Ah Sing with a nod, leaving them and walking off along the beach.

"Roger," said Billy, "I think it'll be all right. That brute means to kill us to-morrow morning, but Ah Sing says he'll help us to escape to-night."

"I hope he does," moaned Roger, with a shudder.
"Ugh! The sight of that knife made me feel sick. Suppose some of 'em are awake to-night, though?"

"If they are I don't know what'll happen."

Roger did not reply, but sat gazing out across the sea with a miserable expression on his face. For perhaps five minutes they sat without talking, and then Billy suddenly gave a short hopeful laugh.

"What's up?" asked Roger, in a surprised voice.

"I've got an excellent idea!" exclaimed Billy.

"What is it?"

"We'll dope 'em."

"What's dope?"

"Drugs. In the stuff we dumped ashore from the wreck there was a medicine chest. I examined it."

"You ain't going to poison them!" cried Roger, in horror.

"Poison—not me! But we'll put 'em to sleep," calmly rejoined Billy. "There are some laudanum tablets in the chest. We'll persuade Ah Sing to tell them that these tablets are the latest kind of opium—give most wonderful dreams. They'll swallow it."

"What!—drugs?"

"Yes and the story too."

"Sounds rather a forlorn hope," said Roger dolefully.

"Jolly sight better than sitting down waiting to be killed," related Billy. "Anyhow we'll suggest it to Ah Sing when he comes back."

Presently the Chinaman returned with two bowls of rice and a wooden bucket of fresh water, and after untying the boys' arms so that they could move them, left them tied to the palm trunks by the ropes passing round their bodies. He then placed a bowl of rice and another of water alongside each of them, but at first their arms were so stiff that they could hardly move them. Seeing their plight, Ah Sing held bowls of water to their lips so that they could drink. The cooling draughts seemed to put new life into them, and they were soon devouring the rice, coarse and unpalatable as it was.

Ah Sing sat down on his haunches and watched them. "B'long hungrily?" he asked at length, with a smile which showed his white teeth.

The prisoners were too busy to reply and merely nodded, but before long Billy had finished his allowance.

"Ah Sing!" he said.

The Chinaman grunted.

"Ah Sing!" continued the boy. "D'you know what opium is?"

"Opium, my savvy!" said Ah Sing with a grin.

"You see that heap over there?" went on Billy, waving his arm to where the robbers were still at work. "At the bottom of that heap is a case of medicine with a new kind of opium in it—in little boxes."

"New opium!" repeated the Chinaman, wrinkling his brow and looking puzzled.

"Yes; special sort made in England," explained Billy, proceeding to explain carefully what the medicine chest

looked like, and particularly how to distinguish the laudanum boxes.

"Hi yah, my savvy!" exclaimed Ah Sing with a knowing smile. "One box plenty strong opium, eh?"

"Yes, that's it. D'you think you could find it and get them to take it?"

Ah Sing scratched his head doubtfully.

"Plenty much stronger than old opium?"

"Yes, plenty much," urged Billy. "So much that it will put 'em to sleep at once."

"No smokee new opium?"

"No, eat—much quicker effect."

The idea seemed to be filtering through Ah Sing's brain, for after thinking for a minute or two his expression changed, and he burst out into a laugh. "Hi yah, my savvy!" he exclaimed, chuckling loudly. "Pilong," he continued, waving his hand towards the knot of men on the beach, "pilong makee fin' box opium, makee eat. Bime' by," he went on, making a grotesque grimace, "pilong no can walk, makee sleep." He put his hand to the side of his face and gave a very successful imitation of snoring, and then looked up at the boys to see if that was what they really meant.

"Yes, that's it!" cried Billy excitedly.

"My tink can do, bime' by. My fin' opium, pilate plenty eat, makee sleep. Ah Sing com', makee cut lope, Eng-leeshman wilo,¹ eh?"

Billy nodded.

"Orl lite, Ah Sing makee tly," said the Chinaman, rising to his feet. "Bime' by com' back," he added over his shoulder, walking off to join his companions on the beach.

Some of the Chinamen, with much strident chattering, were still busy transferring their ill-gotten loot to the junk,

while others were prowling about looking for anything else worth taking. The hut, unfortunately, did not escape their notice, and to Billy's intense disgust he saw a couple of them go inside and reappear a few minutes later with their arms full of some of their most cherished and valuable possessions. The cooking utensils and stove the pirates evidently did not consider worth looting, but nearly all the tools were purloined, and the boys were glad that they had had the foresight to take an axe, hammer, saw, nails, and a few more necessary implements up to Hill Fort.

The dinghy was moored in her usual place in the stream, but though the men examined her intently, and had a violent discussion amongst themselves as to whether or not she should be taken, the matter was eventually decided by the captain of the junk himself, who came up and ordered the men away. The cunning Chinaman evidently thought that an English-built dinghy would look rather out of place on board his junk, and that he might be asked awkward questions as to how he had come by it.

As the sun rose and gathered strength it became overpoweringly hot, and though the captives were more or less in the shade of the palms, the fierce rays beat down on their unprotected heads until the blood seemed to be literally boiling in their veins. They had their hands free, however, and presently, after much wriggling, for the rope was still tight round his chest, Billy succeeded in drawing the back of his shirt up over his head, a device which Roger soon copied. The bucket of water, too, was within easy reach, and they found that by frequently wetting their flimsy headcovering they were able to endure the intense heat with a tolerable degree of comfort. They were far too exhausted to talk, and their heads still throbbed abominably; but in spite of this, and of the awful thoughts which would occupy their minds, the soporific

effect of the heat asserted itself, and they spent much of the morning dozing fitfully.

Towards noon a man arrived with some more food. It was not Ah Sing this time, but an evil-looking fellow who, from his scowling face and fierce expression, evidently regarded the prisoners with hatred. Billy tried to engage him in conversation, but the man simply placed the food within their reach, turned round with a grunt, and shambled off along the beach.

The bowls he had brought contained rice and a certain amount of chopped-up meat and vegetable, which the prisoners were evidently expected to eat with their fingers.

"I don't think much of this stuff!" remarked Billy with a sniff, eyeing the glutinous-looking mixture with a wry face. "Pah, it smells!"

"It's not so bad as it looks," observed Roger, who had already sampled the contents of his bowl.

Billy nibbled gingerly at a bit of the meat and promptly spat it out in disgust. He tried again, and though it did smell atrocious, he shut his eyes and swallowed a morsel with an effort. He persevered, and the noisome-looking mess seemed to taste better as he went on, and before long his desperate hunger overcame his original repugnance, and he was eating ravenously.

The pile of things on the beach had diminished greatly in size, and when, after their midday meal, the Chinamen resumed their work, Billy saw that only one layer of cases remained, and that if Ah Sing did what he had said he would, the moment for the discovery of the medicine chest could not be long deferred.

The time wore on monotonously, and it must have been at about two o'clock when Billy's attention was attracted by the sound of frantic jabbering. He looked up, to see that the workers had ceased their labours, and that they

had clustered round something lying on the beach—what, exactly, he could not see.

“Roger!” whispered Billy excitedly, for the other boy was dozing.

“What is it?” asked the other, waking with a start.

“Look there!”

The men pressed forward shouting excitedly and pushing each other out of the way—and then the medicine chest appeared.

The moment had come.

The boys' hearts seemed to stand still with anxiety, and they gazed at the crowd of men with feverish eyes and with the sweat running down their faces. At this critical moment their thoughts were identical. Would their scheme work, or would it not?

If the plan did succeed, if Ah Sing was faithful to them, they would be free. If he was not— They both gave an involuntary shudder of horror at the thought. The horrible-looking knife of the pirate captain seemed frighteningly close.

Presently a man, clutching a small round box, elbowed his way out of the crowd. He got clear, while some of his companions, filled with curiosity, clustered round him talking excitedly.

Suddenly another man, evidently thinking that the man had taken his box, seized it, and opening it crammed some of the contents into his mouth.

What happened happened at once, for the original owner, who still held the knife with which he had prised open the case, lunged forward with a snarl of rage and buried his blade in the other's chest.

The victim gave a horrible stifled scream, clutched wildly in the air, and collapsed on the beach.

“Great Scott!” cried Billy, aghast at the sight. “He's killed him!”

In a second the beach was in an uproar. The friends of the murdered man drew their knives and flung themselves upon the original assailant, and though he defended himself as best he could and wounded several of his antagonists, he was soon forced to his knees. There he was stabbed again and again, until he finally fell forward with a horrible groan—dead. Still the horrible struggle went on, for now the Chinamen seemed to have divided up into two hostile parties, both intent upon exterminating the other. Knives flashed and went home; more blue-clad figures fell, wriggled convulsively, and lay still.

The once clean bright sand was converted into a hideous shambles.

The fight went on until three men, who were being attacked by fully ten others, suddenly turned and ran for the water in terror.

The rest were soon in hot pursuit.

One poor wretch tripped and fell headlong, but before he had time to rise two of his pursuers were upon him; their knives drove home and he lay still. One of the others, with the blood dripping from a horrible wound, turned and faced his assailants at the water's edge. He fought bravely, and several of the attackers fell never to rise again, but from the first he stood an impossible chance of escape, and before long he, too, was beaten to his knees and dispatched.

The sole survivor of the three was swimming strongly in the direction of the junk, when the pirate captain flung up a rifle to his shoulder—one of the two which had been taken from the boys—and fired. The bullet flicked up a spout of water a good six feet from the swimmer's head, and with a savage grunt the pirate reloaded his weapon, glanced along the sights, and fired again.

Again the shot went wide, and flinging down the firearm the man shouted something to his companions, who rushed

The Boy Castaways

headlong down the beach towards the sampans. The clumsy craft were pushed into the water, some men tumbled into them, and before long they were in full pursuit of the swimmer, their occupants yelling and shouting with devilish glee.

In vain the wretched man turned and dived to evade his pursuers, for presently Billy saw his head close under the bows of the leading boat. A man lifted an axe; the sunlight glinted on its broad blade; it fell—

The horrible spectacle they had just witnessed completely unnerved Billy and Roger. But Nature stepped in to help them; a red mist seemed to rise before their eyes—they both fainted.

CHAPTER XI

The Escape

THE evening had already arrived when Billy came to with a start, for someone had placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asked wearily, opening his eyes and looking round him in surprise, for he had no recollection for the time being of where he was or of what had occurred.

"'S-sh, no makee bobbery,¹" whispered a voice, "makee cut lope."

Then the terrible events of the afternoon flashed through the boy's mind, and looking up, he saw Ah Sing bending over him with a kindly smile.

"Massa b'long orl lite?" asked the Chinaman, drawing his knife and sawing at the tough ropes securing Billy to the tree.

"Thank goodness! Thank goodness you've come!" was all Billy could say.

The Chinaman cut away until his bonds were severed; and too stiff and sore to rise, Billy lay on the ground chafing his aching limbs.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Pilate makee fight, kill plenty man," explained Ah Sing. "'Leven man," he continued, holding up all his fingers and then one single one, "makee dead. Ulla piecee com' ashor', makee eat opium. Makee sleep." He pointed in the direction of the beach.

¹ "Bobbery" is a slang pidgin-English expression for "noise".

The sun had already set in a blaze of scarlet and orange, and dusk was drawing on. No sounds except the fitful soughing of the wind in the palm foliage, and the musical tinkle of the ripples on the shore, disturbed the exquisite silence of the evening, for the discordant jabbering of the Chinese had ceased. Both sampans lay at the water's edge, while farther out the junk was still anchored in the bay, her heavy, ponderous-looking hull clearly outlined against the darkening blue of the sky; but neither on board the ungainly vessel herself nor upon the beach were there any signs of movement.

Many blue-clad figures lay about on the strand in various grotesque attitudes; some, Billy knew, were dead, for they had not altered their positions since the afternoon, but many others lay in huddled attitudes close to the medicine chest. It was obvious that Ah Sing had done his work only too well, for the rest of the Chinamen lie either dead or incapable from the effects of the potent drug they had taken.

"Massa orl lite?" asked Ah Sing again.

"Yes," answered Billy, "I'm all right. By George, though!" he suddenly added, turning round with a twinge of conscience, for he had quite forgotten his companion in distress, "what's become of Roger?"

"Ulla Engleeshman makee sleep," explained the Chinaman.

Billy saw that Roger had been cut free from the palm, but that he was still unconscious, for he had fallen over and lay motionless on his side. He crawled towards him on his hands and knees, for he still felt too weak to trust to his feet, and placing his hand on the other's chest found to his joy that he was still breathing.

"Roger!" he called, shaking him by the arm.

There was no reply.

"Roger!" he said again, louder this time.

"Makee sleep," said Ah Sing, when there was still no sign of movement.

"He can't walk, though," remarked Billy disconsolately, wondering how on earth they could get him to the top of the hill, for even he himself, in his enfeebled condition, felt he would have a difficult job to climb the slope. He thought of dragging Roger through the wood and hoisting him to the hilltop with the pulley; but this seemed too risky to be attempted, and he was racking his brains for a better idea when Ah Sing picked up the inanimate body, slung it over his shoulder as if it had been a sack of potatoes, and held out an arm to assist Billy to rise.

"My can cally orl lite," he explained.

"Can you?"

"Can do, b'long orl lite," repeated the Chinaman, with a grin. "Where you go?"

"Up the hill," said the boy, pointing with his hand.

"Huh! Fi-te,¹ massa!" said Ah Sing, dragging him to his feet.

Billy clutched the proffered arm for support, and together they walked slowly off along the beach. At first every step forward was agony, but soon the movement seemed to bring the suppleness back to the boy's stiffened body and legs, and by the time they had begun to climb he found the progress fairly easy.

The evening had set in and it was now very dark, and they soon found that clambering over the slippery turf and boulders at night was a very different matter from the ascent of the slope in daylight. Still, Billy knew the direction, for he could see the black outline of the summit about him, and though the boulders seemed to be everywhere, and they all but measured their length on the ground on several occasions, Hill Fort was eventually reached in safety.

Roger was still unconscious, and after wetting his lips

¹ "Fi-te" means "make haste" or "quickly".

with water in a vain endeavour to bring him to, they laid him on the blankets in the little shelter tent.

"Makee sleep," observed Ah Sing, examining the invalid's face by the light of a match Billy had struck. "Bime' by orl lite."

"I hope so," replied Billy, rather dubiously.

"Orl can do, my makee wilo," continued the Chinaman, pointing down the hill. "Junk man bime' by ask where Ah Sing?"

Billy did not know that "wilo" meant "go away", but there was no mistaking the Chinaman's evident intention, and jumping to his feet he seized him by the arm.

"No, no," he cried, "don't go away." For he had suddenly come to the conclusion that if he could persuade Ah Sing to stay on the island with them it would make their position much safer.

"No go 'way; w'y for?" asked the Chinaman, in a surprised voice.

"Stop here with us," urged Billy. "You say you're not a pirate."

"My no b'long pilate. My no likee junk man, he b'long——"

"Well, stay on the island with us!" exclaimed the boy, seizing his newly-found friend by the hand. "If you go down and the others find out you helped us to escape, they'll probably kill you."

Though Ah Sing did not fully understand what Billy had said, he evidently guessed his meaning. "My makee stay, massa?" he queried.

"Yes, yes, stay here with us."

"Orl lite, can do," remarked Ah Sing deliberately, after a moment's thought. "My makee stay, massa. Pilate he tink Ah Sing b'long kill, eh?" Billy could not see his face, but heard him chuckling softly to himself, and knew he was pleased with the idea.

"Yes," he said, feeling very relieved, "that's it; you stay with us."

It really was an excellent scheme, he thought; for Ah Sing's help would be invaluable, while, if the pirates did attack Hill Fort, it would be far easier to defend it with his assistance, particularly as Roger was still *hors de combat*. From the ready way in which he had assented to cast in his lot with them, too, it was quite obvious that the man was not a proper member of the bloodthirsty gang of ruffians belonging to the junk, and that, therefore, he could be trusted.

"Thank heaven that's fixed up," said Billy to himself, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Wanchee chow?" he continued out loud, addressing the Chinaman, and using one of the few pidgin-English expressions he knew.

"Hi yah, massa," replied Ah Sing, patting his stomach.

Billy knew where the food was stored, and after lighting many matches eventually succeeded in breaking open a case containing preserved beef. He extracted a tin, and, providing himself with a handful of ship's biscuit, stepped inside the tent to look at the invalid. Roger was still sleeping peacefully, so he thought it best not to disturb him; and going back to where Ah Sing was seated on a boulder, they were soon eating their meagre supper.

Billy was very hungry, and the beef and biscuit tasted doubly good after the horrible concoction of rice which had formed his last meal. His head still throbbed, but it was not nearly so painful as it had been earlier in the day, and as his stiffness had worn off he was beginning to feel quite cheerful and more like his own self. The blow on his head was not so bad as he had at first imagined; though the skin had been cut and the wound had bled freely it was not really very deep, and what worried him most was a lump the size of a pigeon's egg on the back of his skull. He congratulated himself, however, that the weapon with

which he had been struck was a light one, for if it had been a rifle butt, for instance, it seemed doubtful if he would have lived to tell the tale.

Words could not describe his overwhelming joy at their providential rescue from an awful fate, and his feeling of intense thankfulness to Ah Sing for his noble action in helping them. Again and again he wrung the Chinaman's hand, trying to make him understand how very grateful he really was; but Ah Sing himself, being naturally undemonstrative, hardly realized what all the fuss was about, for it did not occur to him that he had done anything particularly heroic.

After supper Billy went in to see Roger, and found him still unconscious. He bandaged his head as best he could, however, and after placing water by his side covered him with blankets and left him for the night, in the hope that Nature would do her work, and that a few hours' sleep would do more to restore him than any further efforts on his part.

Having done this, he procured all four rifles, loaded their magazines and placed them handy with some ammunition, in case the hill was attacked during the night, and then, his preparations complete, he sat down beside Ah Sing.

He felt far too excited to sleep, even if it had been advisable under the circumstances, and for over an hour he carried on a conversation with the Chinaman, in the course of which the latter unfolded the story of his life. He had, it would appear—for at times Billy could not quite understand his English—originally come from Canton, but on reaching the age of eighteen had gone to some relations at Hong-Kong. Soon afterwards he had entered the service of an English family as a “makee learn”, as the Chinese servants who are learning their business are usually called, but after a time he had become a full-blown “boy”, or superior servant. For two years everything had

gone well, and Ah Sing had been happy, but then some money had been stolen in the house and the blame had rested upon him. Though innocent, he could not clear himself of the charge, and he had been convicted and sentenced to a term of imprisonment. On leaving gaol he had returned to his native city, for he could never hope for another situation in the British colony, and for some time he had contrived to make both ends meet as a rickshaw coolie.

He had soon tired of the life, however, and shipped on board the junk, which at first, Billy understood, had been engaged in legitimate trade. After a time, though, the captain found that preying on other undefended native craft was a far more lucrative business than the carrying of merchandise, and so, much against his will, for Ah Sing was no "pilong" as he called it, he found himself a member of a bloodthirsty gang of pirates.

For well over a year they had reaped a rich harvest by attacking peaceable traders, murdering their crews, and then appropriating the cargoes and scuttling the prizes; and though on several occasions they had run narrow escapes of being caught and brought to justice, they had always succeeded in getting away scot free.

It was therefore a providential stroke of luck for the boys that Ah Sing had been on board the pirate craft, for it was he who had suggested a delay in their execution with the idea of assisting them to escape when an opportunity came, otherwise they would have been murdered outright. The Chinaman bore no grudge to the countrymen of the man who had been the cause of his disgrace, for he spoke of the British in terms of the greatest respect.

Billy felt instinctively, too, that his story was perfectly true, for he had volunteered the information as to his past without being questioned. The boy rather wondered why he should harbour no spirit of revenge for the unjust

accusation of theft and his subsequent imprisonment; but Ah Sing was apparently a fatalist, and was firmly convinced that the whole affair had been preordained. "B'long Joss, massa," he said, shrugging his shoulders, when Billy questioned him on this point, and his simple statement was only another way of saying, "If it is written, it is written".

The night wore on, and soon Billy found that he was desperately sleepy. Ah Sing was already slumbering peacefully with his back up against a boulder, and after a glance at him the boy rose to his feet and began to walk up and down to keep himself awake. Presently, however, the monotony of it began to pall, and sitting down close to the sleeping Chinaman he amused himself, although he was not really hungry, by nibbling at a biscuit. This occupation, however, did not prevent his being overcome by his exhaustion, for within five minutes he was nodding, and inside ten was fast asleep.

It was several hours later that he awoke with a start with the awful feeling that the pirates had recovered and were creeping slowly up the hill. He jumped up in terror, and seizing a rifle looked over the breastwork. The moon had long since risen, and the hillside was bathed in a flood of silvery light, but nothing seemed to be amiss. He looked round apprehensively, half expecting to see dark forms lurking in the darker patches of shadow cast by the boulders, but there was nothing there, and no sounds disturbed the stillness except the hoarse croaking of some frogs on the banks of the stream far below him.

"Bah!" he muttered to himself. "My nerves have all gone wrong!"

It was not to be wondered at after the terrible ordeal through which he had passed, and feeling rather nervous, although he knew in his mind that everything was as it should be, he determined he would not go to sleep

again, and made his way towards where Roger lay in the tent.

"Roger!" he whispered, creeping inside on his hands and knees.

"Hallo, is that you, Bill?" came the answer at once in a sleepy voice.

"Thank goodness you've come to!" exclaimed Billy, feeling very relieved.

"What's happened, and where on earth am I?" asked the other. "The last thing I remember was all those beastly Chinamen killing each other on the beach. Ugh!"

"'S-sh! Don't talk so loud; you're in Hill Fort. Ah Sing carried you up here."

"Ah Sing!"

"Yes; he cut us free. You were unconscious. He's going to stay here with us."

"What, on the island?"

"Yes."

"Good egg!" exclaimed Roger. "He's a jolly good chap! I say, Bill?"

"Hallo?"

"Have the pirates gone?"

"No, I saw the junk in the cove about five minutes ago."

"Well, how did we escape them?"

"The opium dodge worked," explained Billy. "It was rather a dirty trick, but all the Chinese who hadn't killed each other celebrated the occasion by getting stupefied; then Ah Sing came along and cut us free."

"Thank heaven! I say, Bill, we ought to be jolly grateful to him!"

"I should jolly well think so!" agreed Billy. "How are you feeling?"

"My head feels a bit rummy, and I'm stiff all over, but otherwise I'm all right. How are you?"

"I've a lump on the back of my head where one of the brutes caught me a crack, but it's much better than it was. You'd better come out and walk about a bit," he suggested; "it'll work off your stiffness, and'll make you all the fitter in case they do attack us."

"Right you are!" said the other. "Give us a hand, there's a good chap."

Billy assisted his friend to scramble out, and together they left the tent. On getting outside, Roger promptly discovered he was famished, and did not hesitate to say so; and when Billy had procured him some food he ate ravenously, desperately hungry after his prolonged fast. Having finished his simple meal he strolled up and down with his companion, trying to work some of the stiffness out of his joints, and as they walked they discussed their providential escape, and tried to make up their minds what would be the next move on the part of the pirates. Ah Sing was still sleeping soundly, so they talked quietly so as not to disturb him.

It was an ideal tropical night, or rather morning, for it was now long past midnight. The majestic vault of the heavens, powdered with its glittering array of stars, hung over their heads in a wonderful curtain of deep velvety blue, and the silvery-yellow globe of the moon, now high above the horizon, bathed the hill in a flood of light in which every individual boulder and each blade of grass stood out as if it was daylight. The magnificence of the great orb was reflected on the calm sea in a broad ribbon of light which quivered and became temporarily intersected by patches of dark shadow as the fitful puffs of wind stole across the surface of the water. Low down on the horizon under the moon lay a densely-banked mass of cumulus cloud. Its vaporous rounded shape seemed to hang motionless in the night air, for it hardly changed its delicately-curved contour in the errant cat'spaws, while it, too, had

borrowed from the silvery light of the moon, for it gleamed spectrally white against the blue background of sky.

The sweet, faint smell of the flowering trees and shrubs in the valley, intermingled with the rich odour of the damp earth down by the stream, was wafted to the boys' nostrils as they walked up and down; but not a sound broke the silence except the croaking of an army of early-rising frogs and the strident chatter of an occasional bird disturbed in its slumber. Billy and Roger listened attentively for any noise from the beach which would indicate that the pirates had recovered and were astir, but nothing suspicious came to their ears; and save for the black shape of the junk anchored in the bay, it seemed difficult to believe that they were not the only inhabitants of the island.

An hour later the first signs of dawn showed as a broad orange ribbon in the eastern horizon, and as they watched, the moon and stars gradually began to lose their brilliance in the paling sky. A glorious flush crept slowly across the heavens, touching the rounded tops of the clouds until they were dyed a vivid rose. Soon, the higher portions of the island assumed their customary daylight colouring, the sea became transformed into a vast surface of liquid iridescent sparkling light, and then, with tropical suddenness, the red globe of the sun leapt into space, the moon and stars vanished, and the sky flashed into a thousand evanescent colours. The day had come.

Billy was watching the sublime spectacle spellbound, congratulating himself again and again that he was still alive, for at this time the day before, death had seemed so very near. He pondered over the almost miraculous sequence of events which had led up to their escape, when the sound of voices, sounding unusually close in the still air, was borne to his ears from the direction of the beach.

"They're on the move!" he exclaimed to Roger. "Let's get back to the fort at once!" for, without meaning to, they had strolled some little distance down the hill.

They turned and ran up the slope and leapt over the boulder breastwork into the fort.

"Wake up Ah Sing!" ordered Billy. "I'll get some more ammunition ready in case they attack!"

Roger shook the still sleeping Chinaman by the shoulder, who muttered something, opened his eyes, and looked round him.

"Hi yah! Wa' b'long, massa?" he observed with a yawn.

"Get up," said Roger abruptly, "the pirates are on the move!"

Ah Sing scrambled to his feet, and then noticed that it was Roger who had aroused him. "B'long orl lite?" he queried, pointing to his head.

"Yes, I'm all right."

"Ah Sing makee cally," explained the Chinaman, pointing towards the cove and then moving his finger up to indicate their ascent of the hill.

"Yes," said Roger gratefully; "if it wasn't for you we should have been killed!" He seized Ah Sing's hand and wrung it, a proceeding which the latter did not understand, for a puzzled expression came over his face.

"Here we are!" cried Billy, coming up, puffing and panting, with a heavy box of ammunition hugged to his chest. "I've brought this along in case we want it. D'you know how to use a rifle, Ah Sing?" he asked, putting the case down and pointing to one of the weapons.

"Huh! My savvy, massa!" exclaimed the latter, nodding his head. He put an imaginary gun to his shoulder, shut one eye and pretended to take aim, and then clicked his tongue to indicate the pulling of the trigger. Billy,

however, was not quite satisfied with this pantomime, so took up one of the rifles and opened the bolt.

"You see this?" he asked, pointing to the cut-off of the magazine. "I open it—so," he explained, "and then a cartridge rises. I then push back the bolt and press the trigger—so." He suited his action to the word, quite forgetting that he had loaded the weapon during the explanation, and the moment he pulled the trigger the rifle of course went off. There was a sharp crack, a spit of flame, and a bullet went soaring skywards. Luckily the weapon was pointing well up in the air, so no damage was done; but the report evidently attracted the attention of those on the beach, for there was a sudden chorus of wild yells followed by dead silence.

"By George!" exclaimed Billy, aghast at what he had done. "I am a silly fool. I fired the thing by mistake, and now the pirates'll know where we are!"

"D'you think they'll attack us?" asked Roger excitedly.

"Bound to, I should think," said Billy gloomily. "Oh, what a silly ass I was to fire the blooming thing!"

"Cheer up, man!" urged the other. "I'm longing to have a pot at them. After all, we both got a crack on the head from the beasts."

"So we did; I quite forgot that."

Feeling strangely excited and rather nervous, for they did not quite know what was coming next, they lay down behind the breastwork with their weapons ready. For some time nothing happened; the junk was still anchored in the bay, but there were no signs of life on board of her; and as the sound of the voices had ceased the boys began to think that an attack on the hill, even if the report of the rifle had told the pirates where they were concealed, was not contemplated.

For fully twenty minutes nothing took place; but then, quite suddenly, there was a great commotion among the

birds in the wood by the stream, and a second or two later the sound of excited voices became audible from the same direction.

"There they are, right enough," laughed Billy; "but they won't get up the hill that way if they try for a week!"

"'S-sh!" whispered Roger. "Don't talk so loud! There are some more of 'em to the right of the trees down there!" He waved towards Point Wedderburn.

"Whereabouts?"

"Just to the left of that big boulder by that very green clump of bush. There!" he added an instant later, as the figure of a man became sharply outlined against the background of the sea. "D'you see him now?"

"Yes," said Billy in an awed whisper; "he's got a rifle too!" The morning sun glinted on the barrel of the weapon the man carried over his shoulder.

The solitary figure, barely four hundred yards distant, stood motionless for a minute. Then, as the boys watched, it turned round, raised an arm, and motioned to someone still out of sight. Soon afterwards three more men appeared and joined their companion. The four of them then stood in a group gesticulating and talking loudly, and all of them carried firearms. Two of the weapons, the boys came to the conclusion, must be the rifles they had left behind close to the hut, but they were quite unable to account for the other two.

"Ah Sing," asked Billy, turning to the Chinaman, "are there any more rifles like this on board the junk?" He patted his own weapon to explain what he meant.

"Have got," replied Ah Sing, nodding his head. "Have got plenty olo piecee."

"Great Scott!" gasped Billy and Roger together, for they had not bargained for the pirates being provided with firearms.

"Well, let's hope they don't know how to use 'em," observed the former.

"At any rate, Ah Sing says they're old ones, so perhaps they're muzzle-loaders, and our four Lee-Enfields, if we can use 'em decently, ought to keep 'em off."

"I hope so," said Roger, feeling rather nervous.

The four Chinamen below had begun to climb the hill, glancing round them as they advanced, and holding their weapons ready for instant use.

"They mean business!" whispered Billy; "but I don't think they quite know where we are. D'you see how they're looking about?"

"It's lucky there are only four of 'em," said Roger, with anxiety in his voice. "The others are still in the wood. D'you hear 'em?"

"Load your rifle and aim at the left-hand man," ordered Billy; "I'll take the right-hand one—the one with the bandage round his head. We mustn't let 'em get too close, and fire when I tell you."

The boys snapped cartridges into the breeches of their weapons, Ah Sing following their example. The pirates were still advancing, and though they were apparently unaware that the boys were on the summit of the hill, neither Billy nor Roger had any qualms about firing upon them, for they well knew what their fate would be if they allowed themselves to be captured.

"Are you ready?" asked Billy, turning round.

Roger nodded.

"Fire!"

The three weapons cracked sharply, and the fight began.

CHAPTER XII

The Chinese are Driven Off

ONE of the four men advancing up the hill dropped his weapon, clutched wildly at the air, and then collapsed in a heap and lay still. The other three stopped abruptly and gazed round them in amazement, seeming at first to be unaware from which direction they were being fired upon. But they were not long left in doubt, for another volley rang out from the top of the hill, and the bullets flicked up the dust all round their feet. None of them was hit, but all three instantly dropped to the ground and took cover behind convenient boulders.

“We’ve got one, at any rate!” exclaimed Billy, ejecting an empty cartridge from his weapon and squinting along the sights ready for another shot.

An instant later the muzzle of a rifle appeared over one of the boulders down the slope.

“Look out!” shouted Roger, turning his weapon upon the spot. “One of ‘em——” He had no time to finish the sentence, for a head was cautiously lifted over the great yellow stone, and getting his sights well in line with it the boy pressed the trigger. The bullet flicked a flake off the boulder, and then, a second later, the pirate fired. He was armed with an old-fashioned muzzle-loading weapon, for there was a dense cloud of white smoke, a loud report, and a heavy bullet hummed through the air with a buzz, like an angry bee.

The missile passed harmlessly overhead, but both Billy and Roger ducked instinctively, for it was the first time in their lives they had been under fire, and if the truth must be told, they felt horribly nervous. Blood-curdling yells from the other Chinamen in the valley, who had heard the firing and knew what was happening, only increased their terror, and for a minute the boys felt completely demoralized, and cowered behind the boulder wall.

"I say, this'll never do!" exclaimed Billy, glancing at his companion. "Look at Ah Sing!"

The Chinaman was loading and firing deliberately, never heeding the bullets flying round him. Presently a missile struck a boulder within a foot of his head, but even this did not disturb him, for he never so much as flicked an eyelid. His example made the boys feel ashamed, for they hated to see a foreigner disdaining cover while they themselves were under shelter; and encouraged by his behaviour they looked over the breastwork in front of them.

The morning sun glinted on a rifle barrel projecting over one of the boulders behind which an enemy lay, and leveling their weapons on the spot, they waited for the man's head to appear. Soon after the pirate's head came up, and they pressed their triggers, but both shots went wide, for the black blob remained in full view, and then they saw the flash of the hostile rifle as it went off. The bullet flew over the breastwork with a savage whine, for the attackers had not yet found the range.

Now that the fight had actually started, the boys' original feeling of fear began to give way to an intense desire to kill their enemies. An irregular spluttering fire was being maintained by the attackers, but the whistling bullets, the sharp cracking of the rifles, and the fearsome roar of the muzzle-loader seemed to lose their horror; and before long they found themselves loading and firing, loading and firing, like battle-tried veterans.

So far the attackers had only lost the one man, but presently one of them, who from the bandage round his head Billy recognized as the captain of the junk, leapt to his feet and made a wild dash up the slope. His two companions followed his example.

“Crack! crack! crack!” went the defenders’ rifles as they loaded and fired as fast as they could. The flying figures seemed miraculously immune from the shower of nickel and lead, for not one of them was touched. On and on they came, until they had arrived within two hundred yards of the summit, where they suddenly dropped to the ground again and took shelter behind the boulders.

“I say, Bill,” said Roger nervously, cramming more cartridges into the magazine of his weapon “our shooting’s not up to much!”

“What range have you got on your sights?” asked the other.

“Three hundred.”

“Shove the flap of the rear sight right down,” said Billy, remembering the instruction in the use of firearms he had received as a scout. “It’s point-blank range now.” He pushed down his own sight as far as it would go, and then leant across and did the same for Ah Sing.

The pirates were still sheltered behind their rocks, blazing away merrily whenever the defenders showed themselves over their rampart, and though the latter fired as fast as they could, the enemy were well covered, and their bullets had no effect.

“My rifle’s red hot,” grumbled Roger, dodging down under cover and refilling the magazine. “I’ve been firing for all I’m worth, but can’t see much to shoot at!”

“For goodness’ sake go easy!” replied Billy anxiously, “we haven’t got too much ammunition.”

“They can’t have much more either,” said the other boy; “how much did we leave in the hut?”

"About a hundred all told, I think. But don't fire unless you see something to pot at. We can't go on like this for very long, and so far we've only bowled over one of 'em!"

The hostile bullets were humming through the air, and every now and then one would land against the breast-work with a vicious smack. The impact flung up slivers of stone, and all the defenders had constant narrow escapes of being hit when they put their heads up to fire. Presently Billy thought of a time-honoured but ingenious scheme he had read about as having been used in the Boer war. He crawled along on his hands and knees under the parapet to a spot about fifteen feet to the right, and then, taking off his hat, reached up and placed it on a rock in full view of the enemy. The latter, thinking someone's head was inside, promptly turned their rifles upon it, for hardly was it in position when a bullet flew through the crown. The battered headcovering nearly fell off the boulder, and reaching up, Billy placed a stone on the brim to keep it there. He was still fumbling with it when another missile struck the boulder and flew off with a savage whine. The boy felt a burning pain in his left hand, and pulling it down hastily saw a long weal across the knuckles from which the blood was welling slowly. He had been struck by a flying splinter of rock, but luckily the wound was nothing more serious than a deep scratch, and though his fingers were all numb with the pain, he bound his hand-kerchief round it and crawled back to where his companions lay.

"What's up?" asked Roger, who did not quite understand what had occurred.

"A bally splinter got me across the back of the left hand," growled Billy, gritting his teeth with the pain.

"Hurt much?"

"'Um!" nodded the other, endeavouring to knot the

home-made bandage with his teeth. "It's a bit painful, but it's not very deep, luckily."

"Let's tie it up for you," said Roger, laying down his rifle.

Billy held his hand out.

"H'm!" remarked the other, as he bandaged the injured member. "It's jolly lucky it wasn't a quarter of an inch farther in. If it had been, you wouldn't have been able to use your rifle. There," he added, tying the knot, "that ought to feel better."

The fight went on, and the hat trick worked successfully enough, for the missiles were striking all round it, while comparatively few came round about the defenders. They contented themselves by firing whenever they saw the pirates expose themselves; but the target offered was very small, and for some considerable time they blazed away without effect.

"Look out!" suddenly shouted Roger; "the fellow on the left's just taken down his rifle. I expect that means another rush!"

They levelled their rifles just above the boulder in question, and soon afterwards, as Roger had said, the man behind it bobbed up to his feet.

"Crack! Crack!"

This time their aim was better, for the pirate dropped his weapon, spun round in the air, and then fell face downwards across the boulder, dead. The two survivors, demoralized at the loss of their leader, lost their heads, and rising to their feet, discharged their weapons at the fort. They seemed to be contemplating another rush forward, but the bullets were flying all round them, and after standing dazed and undecided for an instant, they suddenly turned round, cast away their weapons, and began to run headlong down the hill. The attack had been beaten off.

Standing up, the defenders emptied their magazines at

the flying figures, but in the excitement of the moment they had forgotten to alter their sights, so none of the shots told, and the two men disappeared into the wood unscathed.

Billy whooped with joy. "We've driven them off!" he exclaimed, panting and mopping his streaming face.

"Makee lun. Pilong makee lun!" echoed Ah Sing, capering in glee. "Junk capten makee kill," he added, pointing to the motionless figure lying across the boulder.

Roger was breathless with excitement, and leant exhausted on his rifle with the perspiration running down his face. "By George!" he said at last, "I thought the ugly blighters had got us!"

"So did I," agreed Billy gravely. "Our shooting was pretty rotten, wasn't it?"

Roger laughed. "I think a little water would be a good thing," he suggested, turning round. "I'm jolly thirsty. I'll— Bill!" he suddenly screamed, his face blanching with terror, "look at the rope!"

He pointed to where the spar projected over the edge of the sheer cliff, and there, to his unspeakable horror, Billy saw the rope quivering and the spar bending as if someone was climbing up it.

He stood rooted to the spot, and before he had recovered his full senses a hand, followed by a sinewy brown arm, appeared over the edge of the cliff. The fingers hooked themselves round the spar, an evil yellow face, with a naked curved knife between its teeth, slowly came into view, and then, with a heave, one of the pirates drew himself up on to the smooth turf.

He crouched low for an instant, breathing heavily after his exertion and preparing himself for a spring. His ferocious bloodshot eyes looked round venomously until they lighted upon Ah Sing, a gleam of recognition came into them, and seizing his knife he flung himself towards

the Chinaman with a savage snarl. Billy had recovered himself, and had brought the rifle to his shoulder, but it was now too late to fire.

Ah Sing had summed up the situation, and had rushed forward with his rifle poised as soon as the man had appeared over the cliff, but everything had happened in a flash, and before he quite realized what had occurred the pirate was upon him. He stepped aside nimbly and avoided the first rush, and swinging his weapon over his head prepared to strike at his adversary's head. There was no time, however, for the blow to fall, and in an instant the newcomer had wheeled round and was circling round his enemy waiting for an opportunity to strike home.

Ah Sing was at a disadvantage, for his first movement had placed him between his antagonist and the edge of the cliff, and the pirate was so close that he had no room to use his weapon as a club. The rifle, moreover, was unloaded, and dropping it he sprung upon and grappled his enemy with his bare hands, for he carried no knife.

The pirate made an upward lunge with his blade, but Ah Sing caught his wrist and held it fast, and in an instant the two men were locked together, fighting fiercely. The boys, though their weapons were ready, were powerless to help their ally, for they could not make certain of hitting the right man; and there was no doubt that Ah Sing was getting the worst of it, for his assailant, who was the stronger man, was gradually forcing him towards the edge of the cliff, with the obvious intention of throwing him over.

Ah Sing guessed his enemy's intention, and, still holding on to the other's wrist so that he could not use the knife, locked his legs in those of his opponent and endeavoured to trip him up. His attempt was unsuccessful, and nearer

and nearer to the chasm the combatants drew, until at last it seemed as if they would both go over the brink, still locked in each other's embrace.

The pirate now had one hand on Ah Sing's throat and was trying to throttle him, and try as he could, the latter could not loosen the terrible grasp. He did not dare release the hand which held the knife, or he would have been stabbed at once, and wrestling, slipping, and sliding, drawing nearer and nearer the edge of the precipice, they fought on.

It now seemed but a matter of moments before both of them should disappear into space, and Billy was racked his brains as to how he could help his friend when he noticed the spar was bending again. Another pirate was climbing the rope!

But there was no time to do anything if Ah Sing was to be saved, for inch by inch he was being forced backwards until he was barely six feet from the edge. Something must be done, and that at once. Shouting to Roger to get the axe, Billy nerved himself for a supreme effort, and dashed forward rifle in hand.

He circled round the struggling figures waiting for an opportunity to use his weapon without injuring his friend. At last, when they were barely more than three feet from the brink, the pirate turned his side towards him, and putting the muzzle of the rifle close up against the man's body Billy shut his eyes and pulled the trigger. There was a muffled report as the bullet drove its way through, and Billy felt horribly ill.

When he opened his eyes again Ah Sing had freed himself, and with a dazed expression on his face was looking at the body of his late adversary lying on the ground. He did not seem to understand what had happened, but glancing up he saw Billy standing there with his smoking rifle and a face as white as a sheet, and then with a grunt of

satisfaction bent down, dragged the body to the edge of the cliff and toppled it over. Billy heard it crashing through the bushes as it fell, and then there came the sound of wild yelling from down below in the valley. It was the first time in his life he had killed a man at close quarters, and he thought for a moment he was going to faint, but luckily his senses did not leave him, for at this moment another evil face appeared over the edge of the cliff.

Roger, who had found the axe, rushed forward and began to hack at the spar close to where it passed under the boulder; but it was slow work, and he did not make much progress.

“The rope!” screamed Billy. “Cut the rope!”

Roger heard the shout, and flinging himself prone on the turf made a wild slash at the rope close to where it passed through the block. He missed. The awful grinning face of the climbing pirate was only two feet below him, and to his horror Billy saw the man take the knife from between his teeth and make a savage upward stab at his friend.

But the blow never fell, for Roger’s blade shore through the rope, and with a wild shriek of terror the pirate disappeared into space.

The body of the stricken man crashed down the steep side of the hill, tearing its way through the bushes as it fell; and looking over the edge the boys saw a group of perhaps half a dozen Chinamen clustered at the bottom. The corpse had fallen almost at their feet, and gesticulating and talking excitedly they looked upwards and saw the defenders gazing down upon them.

“Look out!” yelled Billy suddenly; “one of ‘em’s got a gun.”

Roger drew back just in time, for there was a flash of flame, a cloud of smoke, and a heavy leaden bullet hurtled through the air. It did no damage, and seizing his rifle

Billy leant over the edge and fired a shot at the men below. The bullet went over their heads, but it had its effect, for the pirates promptly left the open ground and made for the cover of the trees, leaving the bodies of their two dead companions behind them. An hour passed without incident, and as no noise or sound came from the valley to show what was going on, the boys and Ah Sing, while keeping a good lookout for any signs of movement on the part of the enemy, ate their breakfast. The morning was now well advanced, and after their exertion and excitement they were all desperately hungry. Roger, who had quite recovered from the blow on his head, was sitting on the boulder wall munching his sixth biscuit and nibbling at a bit of corned beef, when he suddenly stopped eating.

“Um!” he exclaimed excitedly, with his mouth full, and pointing towards a sampan full of men pulling hastily towards the junk. “They’re off!”

“What?” said Billy in surprise, starting up.

“They’re off,” repeated Roger, bolting his last mouthful. “Let’s have a shot at them.”

“No,” protested the other. “Don’t for goodness’ sake fire on ‘em. Let ‘em go. If we prevent ‘em getting to the junk they’ll only stay on the island, and that would be a jolly bad lookout for us.”

“Yes, so it would,” agreed Roger, laying down the rifle he had seized.

They watched the sampans, for another had now appeared, as they moved towards the anchored junk; their occupants were evidently in a desperate hurry, for the boats sped through the water, and on getting alongside the ungainly craft the Chinese tumbled out and began to make their preparations for getting her under way.

“Where’s the telescope?” asked Roger, anxious to see what was going on.

“In the tent—I’ll fetch it,” said Billy, moving off.

He presently returned with the glass, and lying down focused it upon the junk.

"H'm!" he said soon afterwards, handing it across to Roger. "How many of 'em can you make out? I can only count eighteen."

Roger levelled the telescope. "One, two, three—" he began to count. "I can see nineteen all told," he concluded.

"How many men were there on board the junk?" asked Billy, turning to Ah Sing.

"B'long thirty-fif," replied the Chinaman, counting on his fingers.

"Thirty-five," said Billy; "and there were eleven killed on the beach, weren't there?"

Ah Sing grinned and nodded.

"Eleven," continued the boy. "Let's see; two went over the cliff and two were shot, that's fifteen. Then there's Ah Sing, that's sixteen. Sixteen and nineteen are thirty-five—they're all accounted for, then."

"I hope they've left nobody behind," suggested Roger. "I shall be jolly glad to see the last of 'em. It would be ripping, though," he added longingly, "to have a parting shot at them."

"Don't be so bally bloodthirsty, Roger," said Billy half seriously. "We've had quite enough fighting to last us for some pretty considerable time, and if you do fire on 'em now you won't jolly well hit 'em."

"I might have a try, though."

"Waste of ammunition, and besides, our shooting's nothing to write home about, and the junk's a good fifteen hundred yards."

"All right, then, I won't," said Roger regretfully.

One by one the brown sails of the junk were mastheaded, the sampans were hoisted on board, and presently, looking through the telescope, Billy saw a blue-clad figure running

forward with an axe in its hand. The sun glinted on the blade as it fell again and again; there was a splash as the end of a hemp cable fell into the water, and then, almost imperceptibly at first, but gradually moving faster, the clumsy vessel began to move through the water.

"They're in a mighty hurry," chuckled the boy. "Cut their blooming cable; no time to weigh the anchor."

"I suppose they think we might come down to the beach and fire at 'em," remarked Roger.

What little wind there was came from the north-west, and when the brown sails of the ungainly vessel bellied out in the breeze she skirted the reef and then stood off to the north-eastward.

"Goodbye, gentlemen!" exclaimed Roger, jumping to the top of a boulder, taking off his hat, and making a sweeping bow. "You haven't taken Hill Fort this time." He put a thumb up to his nose and extended the fingers towards the junk.

"Come down, you ass," laughed Billy. "Come and give us a hand to shove the old flagstaff up."

The bamboo with the flag still lashed to it had been lying on the ground ever since it had been blown down by the storm, for they had not replaced it, but planting the butt firmly in the soil the breeze shook the folds of the bunting clear. They watched the junk as she sailed on over the sunlit sea.

"By George!" said Billy. "I never thought we'd get through."

"No," said the other gravely. "But supposing Ah Sing hadn't been with the pirates?"

CHAPTER XIII

Another Adventure

DURING the next two days the boys and Ah Sing were very hard at work. They first cleared away all traces of the recent fight, burying the bodies of the slain close to where they had fallen, and this gruesome task over, they made a careful and systematic search to ascertain what stores and provisions the pirates had left behind.

The result of this scrutiny was rather disquieting, for most of the articles piled up on the beach had been carried off to the junk, and they found themselves with little besides what they had carried up to Hill Fort.

"I say, Roger," said Billy, gravely examining the piece of paper on which he had been ticking off all the food they had left. "It seems to me we're in a bit of a hole."

"What d'you mean?" asked the other anxiously.

"Well, all we've got in the way of food is three cases of tinned beef, two of ship's biscuit, a couple of sacks of flour which are all wet and musty, that case of biscuits we took to the hut—we've already eaten three or four tins of 'em—and some other odds and ends like tea, coffee, and a few tins of sardines. We haven't many matches left either."

"H'm! but all that stuff ought to last us a pretty good time."

"Yes; but we don't know how long we're going to be stuck on this island," said Billy; "and supposing the pirates come back—"

"D'you think they will?" interrupted Roger excitedly.

"Can't say; but I think it would be safer to live on top of the hill in future."

"What, and abandon the hut for good?"

Billy nodded. "What I was going to say," he continued, "is that we'd better take all the grub we've got to the top of the hill, and not use it at all. Meanwhile," he added, "we must live on bread fruit, and what birds and fish we can get hold of. All the tinned stuff must be left in case anything happens."

"You mean, I suppose," said Roger, "that we must only use it if we're attacked?"

"Yes, that's it."

"I think it's the only thing we can do," agreed the other; "but what about water?"

"We'll have to fill up every blessed thing we've got and get 'em up to the fort," explained Billy. "Once we're attacked we shan't be able to get any more. Oh," he continued, "I forgot about the matches! We'd better keep them too, and not use any unless it's absolutely necessary; we'll have to light the fire for cooking with one of the lenses of the telescope."

"Ah Sing's got a flint and steel," said Roger; "I've seen him using it for lighting that pipe of his."

"So much the better then; and I think we'd better start getting the water up the hill at once."

Three more days' hard work saw the task completed. With Ah Sing's assistance all the provisions were taken up to Hill Fort, while every receptacle which would hold water was filled with the precious liquid and hoisted to the summit, for Billy had succeeded in putting the pulley into working order again. By mutual agreement, and for the sake of economy, it was decided that no more water than was absolutely necessary should be used from the casks in the fort, that all the washing should be done in the stream,

and that all of them should carry water bottles which should be refilled whenever they were anywhere near the rivulet.

When this important matter had been satisfactorily arranged they set about strengthening the fort itself. Towards the north, south, and east, the directions in which the sides of the hill sloped gently and the only quarters from which an attack was possible, the breast-work was heightened by a layer of flour bags filled with tightly rammed earth which would successfully keep out bullets, while loopholes were left between the sacks so that the occupants could fire down the slope without exposing themselves to take aim. This done they congratulated themselves that the hill was practically impregnable so long as their food, water, and ammunition lasted.

The tent also was enlarged and made more habitable, Ah Sing putting up a separate canvas erection for his own use, and by the time most of their belongings had been brought up from the hut and they had got used to the novelty of living on the hill, they found the existence was far less irksome than they had thought it would be.

"I say, Bill," said Roger during breakfast on the seventh day after the pirates had left the island. "What about going to have a look at that cave to-day?"

"What cave?" asked Billy absent-mindedly.

"You know," explained Roger, colouring; "the one we—er ran away from."

"By George! I'd clean forgotten about it, to tell the truth. What about going this afternoon?"

"Why not this morning?"

"Can't do that," said Billy, shaking his head; "we shall all be far too busy. It's your turn for the gun, so you'll have to go and get some birds. For goodness' sake hit 'em," he added; "you only brought back two measly things last time after using five cartridges. I've got to

get bread fruit, and Ah Sing must go and fish; he seems to be better at it than either of us."

"Right you are!" said Roger cheerfully, although he did not like Billy's remarks about his bad shooting.

"The worst of this blooming island," Billy went on to say, "is that it seems to give us such terrific appetites, and we do nothing but look for things to eat. Ah Sing," he continued, addressing the Chinaman, "you must take the dinghy and go fishing again, savvy?"

"My savvy orl lite," replied the Chinaman; "can catch plenty big fish." He grinned and held his hands wide apart to show the size of the fish he expected to procure.

After breakfast they all set off down the hill together. Roger had his father's gun and a supply of cartridges, Billy a home-made rope ladder which he used for climbing the bread-fruit trees, while Ah Sing carried his fishing paraphernalia. The two latter also had rifles and a few cartridges, without which they now never left the camp in case they were suddenly attacked.

The two boys assisted the Chinaman to launch the dinghy over the shallows at the entrance to the stream, for the tide was unusually low, and then separated on their different errands. Ten minutes later Billy was seated on the limb of a tree busily engaged in plucking the bread fruit from the branches overhead. It was not a very difficult job, and in ten minutes he had procured enough to satisfy their needs, and sat on the branch watching the birds and insects darting in and out amongst the foliage. Presently he heard the report of a gun and the shrill chatter of the disturbed birds, and, hoping Roger had succeeded in hitting something, for shot cartridges were getting scarce, he began to lower himself down leisurely. He thought he would leave the rope ladder hanging ready for future use, and, with the bread fruit slung in a hand-kerchief over his shoulder, picked up his rifle from where

he had leant it against the tree trunk. He was about to move off when he heard another report. This time it came from seaward, but as the sound was much sharper he knew at once that it came from a rifle and that Ah Sing must have fired it.

At first he thought little of it, and only wondered vaguely why the Chinaman had fired; but an instant later he heard another sharp crack, and came to the conclusion that something was wrong. What was amiss he did not know, but dropping the fruit he began to run through the wood towards the beach, his mind full of evil forebodings, for he fully expected to find that the pirates had returned.

Several times he tripped and fell headlong, so great was his haste, but eventually he arrived at the fringe of coconut palms and dashing through them came to the shore.

At first he could see nothing wrong. The tide, as he had noticed before, was extraordinarily low, and where, under usual conditions, the low grey cliffs inside Point Wedderburn met the water's edge with no signs of anything to seaward, large masses of rock, uncovered by the tide, now showed above the surface of the water. Here and there, close under the shore, the seaweed-covered hummocks lay in thickly-clustered clumps, with deep pools in between them. Farther to seaward others, more isolated, displayed flat or rounded surfaces above the water, and upon one of these, about two hundred yards from where he stood on the beach, was perched Ah Sing.

The Chinaman had evidently been sitting on the rock to use his lines, for Billy could see the morning sun glinting on the scales of several newly-caught fish, while the dinghy, her painter secured round a convenient pinnacle, floated in the water quite close to him. Ah Sing, with his rifle held ready, was standing up gazing intently at the boat, and then for the first time the boy noticed that she seemed to be floating in a peculiar manner. Her stern

was almost level with the water, while the bows were well up in the air, and, unable to understand what was happening or what the man was looking at, Billy began to run towards him. Ah Sing saw him coming, and pointing excitedly to the boat shouted something. Billy could not catch what he had cried, but there was no mistaking the tone, and clutching his rifle he sped on as fast as he could. For the first hundred yards or so his way lay along the beach where the going was comparatively easy, but coming to the fringe of rock he soon found himself making deplorably slow progress. Sliding and stumbling on the seaweed, leaping from rock to rock, splashing through the shallows, and at times being forced to make wide detours to avoid the deeper pools, he gradually approached the spot where the Chinaman stood, and was within fifty yards of him when another wild yell caused him to look up.

The dinghy was lying deeper in the water than ever, and rocked violently from side to side, while wriggling across the stern of the boat was a black, slimy-looking, flexible object, seemingly about a foot in diameter, and something like the trunk of an elephant. What it was he did not know, but splashing on he came to within ten yards of where Ah Sing stood. He could get no nearer, for the rock on which the Chinaman was perched was a large flat-topped hummock separated from Billy's ledge by a wide deep channel; but a second later Ah Sing put the rifle to his shoulder and fired again in the direction of the boat.

Hardly had the report rung out when the black object released the dinghy, which, freed from the weight, came up with a jerk which snapped the painter. The boat drifted away from the rocks, but Billy knew that the incoming tide would carry her into the cove until she grounded on the beach. Had the ebb been making instead of the flood she would have been drifted out to sea.

The object stood upright out of the water, swaying slowly from side to side, and then the boy noticed that it tapered gradually, and was fully twenty feet long. On one side of it were rows of circular orifices, and then he felt horribly ill, for he realized he was gazing at the tentacle of a gigantic devil fish!

He had never seen a decapod before, but had read about them in books, and there was no mistaking the horrible swaying feeler. He looked at it spellbound, obsessed by some fearful fascination, and then, like a flash of lightning, the awful thing whipped down and fastened silently on to the very rock on which Ah Sing stood. The Chinaman saw it coming and leapt out of the way, but he was too late, for there was a violent commotion in the water, and two other tentacles shot into sight and began to wave in the air over his head. He gave an unearthly scream and fired a shot from his rifle, but the bullet had no effect, for curving sharply downwards one feeler flicked itself round his right ankle and another fastened round his waist. He had now dropped his useless rifle, and having drawn his knife was slashing and hewing at the murderous things which held him; but his frenzied efforts had no effect, and unable to maintain a foothold on the slippery rock, he was drawn slowly but surely to the edge. He fought valiantly for his life, but he was no match for the powerful monster into whose clutches he had fallen. Screaming with terror, he was dragged to his knees, tearing at the awful tentacles with his bare hands, for he seemed to realize that if once his terrible assailant got him into the water he was lost. For a moment the creature seemed to play with its victim, for Ah Sing, his face white and drawn with agony, hooked his bleeding fingers into a cleft in the rock and managed to hold his own. But it was not for long, for there came another swirl in the water, and another tentacle fastened

round his body, while the head of the gigantic creature came into view. Billy could see an enormous black mass dragging itself slowly on to the sloping portion of the rock just under water. He had a fleeting vision of a pair of evil-looking eyes as large as saucers, an enormous horrible curved beak, and two distended gills; but though he felt overcome by a violent nausea he succeeded in keeping his head, and snapped a cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

Ah Sing was now screaming horribly as he was dragged towards the water, but lifting the rifle to his shoulder, the boy took careful aim between the yellow eyes of the monster and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck one of the tentacles, which promptly released its hold on Ah Sing and began lashing the air as if in insensate fury. But the shot had given the squid something to think about, for it stopped dragging at its would-be victim, and levelling his weapon the boy fired again.

This time his aim was better, for the missile ploughed its way through the creature's head, and hardly stopping to think Billy plied the bolt of his rifle with feverish haste until he had exhausted the contents of the magazine.

Some of the bullets apparently went home, for the surrounding sea became opaque and black as the decapod discharged the contents of its ink bag. The tentacles released their hold, waved to and fro, lashing the water into foam in their mad impotent fury, and then suddenly disappeared as the vast bulk of the awful beast slipped off the rock into deep water.

It had gone, and nothing remained to mark its presence except a horrible odour and the black discolouration of the water.

"Ah Sing!" yelled Billy, for the Chinaman lay still on the rock without seeming to realize that he was free, and the boy, not knowing whether or not he had killed the

creature, feared that it might reappear at any moment.
“Ah Sing! Ah Sing!”

The Chinaman lifted a blanched, agonized face, and looked round him with a dazed expression, for as yet he was still too terror-stricken to understand what had occurred.

“Ah Sing, swim across!” shouted Billy again.

Still, the man did not seem to realize what was required of him. Billy did not wait to consider the risk; he knew it was imperative that Ah Sing should be brought across somehow, and, dropping his rifle, plunged into the sea and began to swim towards the hummock on which the Chinaman lay. Every second he expected to feel one of the dread tentacles grip him round the body, but the short distance was accomplished in safety, and clambering up over the seaweed he bent over the injured man. He had gone off into a swoon, and the loose blouse he wore had been torn from round his waist in the struggle, while on the bare skin many punctured wounds showed where the horrible suckers had been at work. The rifle he had dropped during the fight still lay beside him, and as it was far too precious to be left behind Billy hurled it across to the ledge of rock he had just vacated, where, with great good luck, it landed on a mass of thick seaweed.

Seizing Ah Sing by the shoulders, he then began to drag him towards the water's edge. The natural slope of the rock helped him, and before long he was swimming on his back with his fingers clutching the Chinaman's shoulders. It was a more difficult task than he had bargained for, but somehow or other he succeeded in getting across, and dragged the inanimate body out of the water.

The tide was now rising fast, and every second was of importance if he did not wish to be cut off by the incoming flood, and bending down he tried to lift the

insensible man on to his shoulders. This, however, was a feat which was quite beyond his strength, and after several ineffectual attempts, he desisted and looked round in absolute despair for some other method of achieving his object. Glancing towards the beach, his eyes lit upon the dinghy floating within a fathom of the shore, and he was contemplating swimming to the boat and bringing her back, when he suddenly saw Roger coming down through the coconut grove.

“Roger!” he bawled.

The figure stopped, and shading its eyes, gazed seawards.

“Bring the dinghy across here! Quick! The tide’s coming in fast!”

Roger heard, for he waved his hand to show that he understood, and dropping his gun ran down the beach towards the boat. In a few seconds he had waded out and clambered on board, and then, shipping the oars, began to pull towards the ledge with long sturdy strokes.

The water was already lapping over the rocks, but in a few minutes the boat was alongside, and Roger leapt out with the end of the painter in his hand.

“What on earth’s been happening?” he asked, gazing with astonishment at the unconscious figure of Ah Sing. “I heard a lot of firing going on; what’s it——”

“I’ll tell you when we get ashore,” interrupted Billy. “The tide’s coming in fast, and there’s no time now. Shove those rifles in the boat, and then give us a hand with Ah Sing.”

Roger placed the weapons in the dinghy.

“Now then, take hold of his feet; I’ve got his shoulders. One, two, three, up!”

They lifted the insensible man, and after much difficulty, for he was no light weight, succeeded in placing him in the stern of the boat, where he collapsed into a crumpled heap.

"What the dickens is the matter?" asked Roger again, for he was bursting with curiosity. "What have you been doing, and what's all that blood round his waist?"

"He was caught by an octopus¹ and jolly nearly dragged under," explained the other boy. "I shot at the brute, and he let go, but Ah Sing was nearly gone. Come on," he added, "buck up and jump in; he's in a pretty bad way, and we must get him ashore as soon as we can."

"An octopus!" echoed Roger in amazement as he stepped into the boat and took his place at the oars. "It must have been a pretty big one to have mauled him like that," he continued, glancing at Ah Sing's wounds.

"It was," answered Billy; "the tentacles of the beastly thing were quite twenty feet long. Come on, up with her!" he added, driving the blade of his own oar into the water.

After a short row the bows of the boat grated on the shingle, and getting out, the boys lifted the still unconscious Chinaman and struggled with him up the beach, where they laid him in the shade of the coconut palms close to the stream. While Roger returned to secure the boat for the time being, Billy procured water and bathed the wounded man's face, and after a few minutes of this, he had the satisfaction of seeing the invalid open his eyes. He saw Billy bending over him, and then seemed suddenly to realize what had occurred, for a look of horror came into his face.

"It's all right, Ah Sing," said the boy, anxious to reassure him.

The Chinaman seized the boy's hand and wrung it. "Hi yah, massa!" he remarked gratefully. "Debbil makee catch Ah Sing. Massa makee shoot!"

¹ Billy was wrong in calling the huge cuttle-fish an "octopus". The larger species of squid are provided with ten tentacles, two of which are considerably longer than the others.

The words were the only ones in which he knew how to express his gratitude, and Billy could not help feeling rather pleased that he had had a chance of repaying the debt they owed the Chinaman for saving their lives a few days before.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Huh, my b'long orl lite!" said Ah Sing, patting himself all over and then rising to his feet. "Debbil makee sclatch," he added, pointing to his torn blouse and the wounds round his middle.

Thanks to his splendidly strong constitution he seemed to be little the worse for his horrible adventure, and his one regret seemed to be that he had not slaughtered his formidable antagonist himself.

"Hallo! He's all right again!" said Roger, coming up from the beach.

Ah Sing laughed and pointed at Billy. "Massa Beely makee kill debbil," he remarked. "Massa Beely b'long numba one piecee man. He no shoot. Ah Sing makee dlown, debbil makee eat. My savvy!" he concluded, wagging his head.

The boys, while feeling very relieved that his hurts were not more serious, could not help laughing at his quaint way of expressing himself.

"Do tell us, Bill," said Roger, agog with curiosity, "how it all happened?"

Billy told him what had taken place, and when at last the narrative was finished, his hearer's mouth was wide open with astonishment.

"My sainted aunt!" he exclaimed, "you don't mean to tell me the beast's feelers were really that length?"

"Of course I do!" said Billy. "I'm not pulling your leg!"

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun."

"Well, did you kill the brute?"

"I hope so, but can't say for certain," replied Billy. "At any rate," he went on with a shudder, "I'm not going to mess about on those beastly rocks again. Ugh!"

"No, none of us must go near 'em," agreed Roger. "Well, what's the programme now? Ah Sing doesn't seem to be very much the worse for it."

"My b'long numba one," put in Ah Sing, hearing his name mentioned.

"That's all right," said Billy. "Well, I vote we——" He suddenly stopped short in what he was going to say and pointed out towards the cove. "What the dickens is happening out there?" he asked.

In the vicinity of the rocks on which the struggle with the decapod had taken place, now well covered by the tide, the water was literally alive with many triangular black objects, darting to and fro with lightning velocity. Every now and then one of them would disappear beneath the surface, but they all seemed to be circling round in much the same locality, and to be pushing and jostling each other out of the way.

"They're sharks!" exclaimed Roger, recognizing the dorsal fins and catching sight of a gleam of white as one of the monsters turned over. "Dozens of 'em!"

It was the first time they had noticed sharks round about the island, but the fact of their presence showed without a doubt that Billy's bullets had accounted for the devil fish, for they were in the exact spot where the latter creature had slid off the rock. The voracious scavengers of the sea, scenting food from afar, had hastened in from seaward to satisfy the cravings of their ever-ravelling appetites on the succulent remains of the giant squid, a chance of gorging themselves which the greedy fish would not allow to escape.

"Shall we shoot at 'em?" asked Roger, anxious to drive them off.

"No," answered Billy. "What's the good? We may as well let 'em eat the brute, they're not doing us any harm. Serves the old octopus jolly well right for trying to chaw up Ah Sing!"

For an hour or more the ravenous creatures continued their feast, and then, having satisfied their voracious appetites, departed as suddenly as they had arrived.

Soon afterwards the boys and Ah Sing returned to the fort, the expedition to the cave having been abandoned for the time being, and after a late midday meal, the remainder of the afternoon was spent in doing the various odd jobs which were constantly cropping up.

Towards sunset Billy and Roger went down the hill to the beach to secure the dinghy for the night. The ebb was making, and on the sand close to the boat, stranded by the falling tide, was about six feet of one of the decapod's tentacles. The horrible thing, as thick as a well-grown sapling, had evidently been bitten off from the body by the sharks, and corroborated their supposition that the great creature was dead. They examined it attentively, looking with interest at the horrible circular-shaped suckers.

"I'm jolly glad it didn't get hold of me!" observed Roger with a shudder. "It's a wonder Ah Sing got off so lightly. Just look at these little teeth things round the inside of each sucker!"

"Look pretty ghastly, don't they?" said Billy.

"I should jolly well think they did. How does the brute eat things, though? Are all the suckers separate mouths? They look rather like it."

"I don't know much about it, to tell the truth," said Billy, "but I believe they simply use their tentacles for catching hold of what they want to eat, and then swallow through their mouths in the ordinary way. Bah!" he

went on, "you should have seen this brute's mouth; it was a great thing with a beak like a parrot!"

"I'm rather glad I didn't; this remnant is quite bad enough!"

"Come on," urged the other. "We mustn't stay here. It's getting dark, and we must moor the dinghy up."

They rowed the boat to the entrance of the stream, dragged her up to her usual mooring place, where they secured her for the night, and then trudged off towards Hill Fort.

"I think we might go and have a look at the cave to-morrow," observed Billy, as they began to climb. "It would be rather a good idea, though, if we got down over the cliff with a rope. I don't fancy messing about in the boat after that show to-day."

"It ought to be easy enough," agreed Roger, "and it'll certainly be far safer to get down on to the beach by the cave in that way. There may be some more of those beastly octopuses——"

"Octopi, please," put in the other, laughing.

"Octopi, then, lurking around."

"Right-o!" answered Billy. "That's settled. If Ah Sing's too bad to come—he doesn't seem to feel much now, but I expect he'll be a bit stiff to-morrow—we'll go by ourselves. We mustn't run away this time!" he added with a grin.

They soon reached the fort, where they found Ah Sing, who was an excellent cook, had got supper ready. They were all three soon busy over the meal, and an hour later, before the last remaining gleams of the setting sun had quite faded from the sky, they were all fast asleep in the tents, tired out after the strenuous day.

CHAPTER XIV

The Cave and its Contents

BILLY was first out of the tent the next morning, and when he emerged into the open air rubbing his eyes, he found the weather formed a complete contrast to that which they had experienced throughout their stay on the island. It was still overpoweringly hot, but there was a humid feeling in the air, and though rain was not actually falling it appeared as if it might do so at any minute, for the risen sun only showed dimly at intervals from behind banked-up masses of watery-looking cloud. Overhead a grey pall stretched from horizon to horizon, while here and there dark clusters of rain clouds showed up against the lighter background. There was little wind to dissipate the vapour, and even the familiar outlines of the island were blurred and indistinct in the mist rising from the ground. The silence, too, was oppressive, for the birds in the woods were not saluting the arrival of the sun with their customary strident chatter, and the only sound which came to the boy's ears was the low reverberating thunder of heavy rollers as they broke on the reef far below him. The night before, the great ocean had shimmered in unruffled tranquillity, and Billy was quite seaman enough to know that a heavy swell with no appreciable wind was, as a rule, the almost certain forerunner of a storm.

He thought, as he laid the fire in the stove for cooking breakfast and then used one of the precious matches to

light it, that in rainy weather the tents would offer very poor shelter compared with that of their comfortable little hut, and he was casting round in his mind for the best method of erecting more weatherproof shelters on the top of the hill, when Roger came out of the tent, yawning and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Heigho!" he remarked lazily, stretching himself and looking round. "What a beastly day!"

"Yes," answered Billy. "I'm afraid we'll have rain before long. There's hardly a breath of wind, and look how all the mist's hanging round the land. It'll blow too, or I'm a Dutchman," he added, cocking his head on one side to listen. "D'you hear the sea booming on the reef?"

Roger listened. "Sounds pretty bad," he remarked apprehensively. "A heavy swell's a bad sign, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"What had we better do, then? These tents of ours won't be very much good in heavy rain, and if it comes on to blow like it did last time they'll be torn to ribbons."

"Just what I was thinking," put in Billy. "We'll have to put up something a little more solid before the rainy season comes on. As a matter of fact," he went on, "it isn't properly due yet, but it won't do to leave it too long." He put the filled kettle on the stove as he spoke.

"What sort of a thing d'you propose shoving up?" queried Roger.

"Don't quite know, we must think about it. We've got a lot of that paint left we used for the inside of the hut, and painted canvas 'ud be better than the ordinary stuff. You might shove those fish in the frying pan," he added, changing the subject. "Put a little butter in with 'em; for goodness' sake go easy, though, the stuff's precious."

Five minutes later the fish were sizzling over the fire with an appetizing smell.

"Roger," said Billy, looking up from the stove and noticing the other was doing nothing in particular. "You might go and roust out Ah Sing. He's usually up first, but after that show yesterday I expect he's feeling a bit groggy."

Roger went across to the Chinaman's tent and poked his head inside, finding the occupant already awake.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Ah Sing velly sick," said the man, crawling out of the shelter and rising to his feet. "My b'long orl same cheesi dis mornin', no stlong."

"Cheesi, what's cheesi?" asked Roger, never having heard the expression before.

"Orl same small piecee boy," explained Ah Sing, with a grin, putting his hand to within about three feet of the ground as he hobbled towards Billy.

"Well, how are you feeling?" asked the latter, looking up from his work.

"No b'long stlong," repeated the invalid; "debbil bite no good." He pointed to his waist where his wounds had been roughly bandaged the night before.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" queried Billy anxiously.

"To mollow orl lite," said Ah Sing, shaking his head and sitting himself down close to the stove in anticipation of breakfast. "Dis day," he added, "no likee walk; Ah Sing no b'long stlong."

Billy's fears were calmed, for the invalid was evidently not very badly hurt, and merely required a day's rest to make him quite well again.

The boys had already decided to devote the morning to an examination of the cave, and soon after breakfast they set out, leaving Ah Sing in the fort with instructions to fire a rifle if anything happened. They took with them, in addition to their weapons, an iron crowbar, several fathoms

of strong rope—previously knotted at short intervals to facilitate climbing—and one of the ship's lanterns, with the necessary candle and a box of matches, and scrambling down the slope without difficulty soon came to the edge of the cliff overlooking the beach in which the opening to the cave was situated.

The weather seemed to be improving as the day wore on, for, though there was a heavy swell breaking on the beach below, the rain clouds in the sky had begun to disperse, and no longer threatened to discharge their contents upon the island. The mist, too, had dissolved as the sun had gathered power, and though the grey pall still hung overhead, ever-widening blue rifts appeared in the canopy until every now and then the sun broke through the curtain and shed his welcome rays over land and sea.

"Seems to be improving," remarked Billy, noticing the change in the sky as he cast about for a suitable place from which they could lower themselves to the beach. "D'you notice," he added, glancing upwards, "how most of those small clouds are travelling off to the south-west?"

Roger looked up. "Yes," he said; "what does it mean?"

"I think," answered Billy, for he was not at all a bad weather prophet, "we're going to have a hard blow from the north-east. The clouds are all coming from that direction and some upper current of air is moving 'em along, pretty fast, too."

"But why d'you say it'll blow?"

"For one thing the swell's coming from the north-east, and it's evidently been knocked up by a storm a long way off which will reach us eventually. There's not a breath of wind down here to account for it. We'll have rain, too, later on. Did you notice the colour of the sunset last night?"

"Can't say I did."

"Well, there was a lot of yellow and green in it, and those two colours are always bad signs."

"You seem to be rather hot stuff on the weather," remarked Roger, rather enviously. "You're generally pretty correct."

"Mr. Hardcastle taught me all I know," explained Billy; "and he always knew when to expect a blow, even without looking at the barometer. Come on," he added, "we mustn't stop here yarning. Let's look for a place to get down to the beach."

They searched round, and presently came to a spot where the ground sloped until the cliff was no more than thirty feet high. They then drove the crowbar firmly into the turf some distance from the edge, and knotting one end of the rope securely round it, dropped the other over the edge of the cliff. It was long enough to reach the beach, and after pulling on it with their united weight to see if the crowbar would bear the weight, Billy slung his rifle over his shoulder and prepared to descend.

He hitched the lantern to his belt, and clutching the rope with both hands lowered himself over the brink, and in a few seconds, for the cliff sloped gently and afforded him a certain amount of foothold, he was standing on the beach below. Roger presently joined him, and together they tramped off along the shingle towards the entrance to the cave. Now that they had had time to consider matters in their true light they realized the utter absurdity of their panic-stricken flight on their former visit to the cave, and this time they exhibited no traces of nervousness, for they went up and examined with interest the half-obliterated letters and symbols cut into the wall of the rock. The inscription still stared at them as large as life—

with the ominous arrowhead above and the skull and crossed arrows below, and though they investigated it carefully they could gather no further clue as to why or by whom the mysterious letters and symbols had been so laboriously cut.

"Come on," said Billy, finishing his scrutiny. "The fellow who did it must have done it to while away the time. Let's light the lantern and have a look at the cave itself."

He struck a match and held it to the wick of the candle, and when the flame burned up steadily, advanced into the cavern, holding the lantern in front of him.

For the first six feet the interior was well illuminated by the daylight coming in through the entrance, and glancing round they found themselves in a natural grotto about ten feet from side to side, whose walls were composed of the ordinary dark-grey rock. Here and there small trickles of moisture showed where the water had percolated through from the soil above, but the floor was composed of perfectly dry, clean, white powdery sand, which pointed to the fact, as did also the absence of all seaweed or other debris, that even during the highest tides the place was never flooded. The roof, covered with long stalactites of some whitish-looking substance, formed a natural arch about eight feet over their heads, and so far their close scrutiny revealed nothing remarkable.

Within a dozen feet of the entrance the cavern curved slightly to the left, and going round the corner the boys found that nearly all traces of daylight vanished, and that they had to rely solely upon the feeble gleams of the candle. Billy was leading and was walking on, shedding the light over the walls, when he suddenly gave a loud exclamation and tripped over something embedded in the floor. He put out his hand to save himself from falling, but found nothing to support him, and before he quite realized what had happened he measured his length in the

sand. The lantern was dashed from his hand as he tripped up, and promptly went out.

"What's up?" exclaimed Roger in amazement, surprised at a fleeting vision of his friend falling flat and the subsequent total darkness.

"Pah!" spluttered Billy, spitting out a mouthful of sand and wiping a great deal more from his nose and eyes. "I tripped over something. I've swallowed about half a pound of grit."

"Light the candle and let's have a look."

"Don't be in such a hurry," retorted Billy, rather annoyed. "I'm doing it as fast as I can. I can't find the matches."

They were in pitch darkness, but presently Billy, having wiped away most of the sand clinging to his face and hair, remembered he had put the matches in his hat for safety. It took him some time to find them, for his headgear had been knocked off when he fell; but after a lot of fumbling around he eventually discovered it, and striking a match endeavoured to relight the candle. It flickered and went out, and once more they were plunged into total darkness.

"I say, steady on, man!" said Roger with a snigger, when for the third time the light went out. "Matches don't grow here."

"Don't be funny!" growled Billy, rather nettled. "The door of the lantern flew open when I fell down, and the sand's all stuck to the hot end of the beastly candle. Blow the wretched thing!" he added vehemently as the fourth match burnt his fingers without igniting the obstinate wick.

"I'll take it outside and light it," said Roger; "I'm nearest the entrance."

"Here you are, then," said Billy, handing the offending article and the matches towards where he imagined his companion to be. "Chop a bit off the end of it with

your knife if you can't do it any other way. Catch hold. Where are you——?"

"Ow!" suddenly expostulated Roger at the top of his voice. "Take the rotten thing away!"

"What the dickens is the matter now?"

"Matter!" exclaimed Roger indignantly. "You've been pressing the top of the bally lantern into the small of my back for the last five minutes, and the thing's nearly red-hot! Ow!" he cried again as Billy moved it in his direction again.

"Oh, take it!" laughed Billy, wishing he could see his friend's face, and rather pleased at having scored off him. "Serve you jolly well right for making silly, rotten remarks to me!"

Roger eventually found the lantern and went off grumbling, and before long reappeared with the candle well alight.

"Now," said Billy, "we'll have a look at the thing which capsized me. By George!" he suddenly broke off, tugging at something, "look at this."

"This" was a rusty bladed weapon half-buried in the sand.

"What is it?" asked Roger excitedly, craning forward to get a better view.

"It's a cutlass!" announced Billy in astonishment. "D'you see the broad blade and this curved guard? It's very much like the ones I've seen hung up in coastguard stations at home."

"It's been here a pretty good time by the look of it," put in the other. "The blade's almost eaten away by the rust."

"Yes; it looks old fashioned too. I shouldn't wonder if it belonged to the fellow who did all that writing on the wall."

"D'you really think so?" said Roger in an awed whisper,

for now that they had come across the weapon he began to feel rather nervous.

"I don't see who else could have left it here," said Billy, placing the rusty cutlass on one side and rising to his feet. "Come on, though, let's have the lamp; I vote we go on."

In single file, Billy leading with the lantern, they advanced another few paces, and found the cavern narrowed into a small passage barely four feet across from side to side, while the roof was so low that they found they could touch it with upstretched arms. Save for the flickering gleam of the candle, the place was in pitch darkness, and trailing the fingers of his right hand along the rocky wall as some sort of a guide as to the direction, Billy suddenly realized the passage was curving to the right. He stumbled on another few feet, for the sandy floor had now given way to hard rock, and then a sudden puff of cold air made the flame of the candle flicker. He felt the cool breath on his face, and noticed at once it came from in front, and was just about to remark to Roger that it seemed rather peculiar when he saw a feeble glimmer of daylight a short distance to his right and some way above him. At the same instant he felt his fingers leave the rock and slide off into air.

Holding the lantern overhead he saw they had emerged into a small chamber in the very heart of the cliff. It had a damp, earthy smell, in spite of the current of air, and the roof was at least ten feet over his head, and seemed to be overhung with similar stalactites to those they had already seen in the outer cave. To the right and above him a narrow funnel-shaped aperture communicated with the outside air, for through it he could see a patch of sky and the branches of some bush growing round the opening.

"I wonder where that hole leads to?" asked Roger.

"Somewhere in the side of the hill," said Billy. "Seems

to me as if it was in the middle of a patch of scrub. We must have come in a good twenty-five or thirty feet, and this place seems to be a regular chamber. I'm going to walk round it, keeping to the wall."

He took the lantern in his left hand and, stretching out his right, walked back until his fingers rested on the wall, and then began to move slowly to the right. Roger followed him closely, and stumbling on in the semi-darkness they soon found themselves almost immediately underneath the hole in the roof. Going on, they found their progress impeded by an enormous slab of rock, and lowering the light to find a way round it Billy gave a sudden gasp of surprise.

"What's up?" queried Roger, hearing his friend's exclamation.

"This place has been used for cooking!" observed Billy with suppressed excitement, pointing to some flat stones arranged in the form of a primitive fireplace.

They bent forward and examined them with curiosity. There could be no doubt as to their original use, for across the top of the erection were several rusty iron bars serving as a grate, and plunging his hand underneath, Billy drew out a handful of half-charred rotted wood.

"Hallo! What's this?" exclaimed Roger an instant later, for in advancing a step he had stubbed his toe against something which he knew from the sound was not rock. He bent down, and after fumbling about for a second or two lifted a familiar object into the lantern light.

"A kettle!" they both exclaimed at once.

It was a large iron kettle, pitted and rusted from disuse, and with a large hole in the bottom, and the sight of it brought back to Billy visions of the *Saracen's* galley, where he had often seen a similar one bubbling on the stove.

"That came from a ship!" he announced. "You never see kettles of that size anywhere else. I say," he added breathlessly, "this is beginning to get jolly exciting!"

"Half a mo'," interrupted Roger, for Billy was just about to move on, "I've found something else! Let's have the lamp."

He had been feeling about with his fingers, and, handing him the lantern, Billy saw he had discovered a strange collection of articles. In a natural niche in the rocky wall, just behind the fireplace, were a couple of small stewpans, both in an advanced state of rust, three tarnished forks, two horn-handled table knives, with the blades nearly eaten away with rust; a half coconut shell which had evidently served as a drinking mug, a large uncorked wine bottle of dark-coloured glass, the contents of which had long since evaporated; a battered cook's ladle, also of iron, with the rust scaling off it, and nine ordinary leaden bullets. Billy reached across and took up the forks, for it occurred to him that they might be engraved with some monogram or crest. He was not wrong in his supposition, for though badly discoloured they were obviously silver, and a design was engraved upon the handles of all three of them. He held them closer to the light, and after rubbing them with his sleeve saw, with some difficulty, that two of the forks were identical in pattern, and bore a crest of what appeared to be an upright arm with its hand holding a fleur-de-lis, while underneath, in a wavy ribbon, appeared the words "PONE IRA FRENA" in small letters. The third specimen was inscribed with the symbol of a hand holding a peculiar-shaped cross, and had for its motto the words "PER MARE PER TERRAS".

"Who on earth did these belong to?" asked Billy, handing them across. "D'you see the crests and mottoes?"

"Yes," said Roger; "I wonder what they mean?"

"The first beats me, my Latin's not up to much, but

per mare per terras means 'by sea and land', or something of the kind."

"It's jolly funny how they came here though," remarked Roger. "They're obviously silver—I can see the hall marks—and they're not the sort of things one generally sees in a ship, are they?"

"No," said Billy, "they aren't; but what I think has happened is this. Someone belonging to the *Black Arrow* has evidently lived in this cave, and he was the chap who scratched all that writing and the skull on the wall. We know he lived here, because this"—pointing to the ledge—"is where he kept all his cooking things, and here's his fireplace. Not much doubt about that, is there?"

"No; but that doesn't account for the forks with the crest," said Roger. "You see," he added, with a touch of detective instinct, "the knives, or what remains of 'em, are not the same quality as the forks, but yet they all seem to have been used by the same people. The crests, too, are different, and that's rather funny, isn't it?"

Billy thought hard for a moment. "I dare say," he said finally, "that if the *Black Arrow* was a proper pirate they may have attacked and looted some passenger ship, and that these forks may have been among the stuff they took. They're silver, you can see that from the hall mark, and are therefore the sort of things which would attract 'em. Do you see what I mean?"

"That's the only way to account for it," agreed Roger; "but I vote we go on. Perhaps we shall find something else which will tell us more."

Following the wall, which still curved to the left, Billy took the lantern and walked slowly on, casting the light over the walls as he went. He had barely gone three paces, however, when he saw something white glimmering on the ground close ahead, and throwing the rays of the lantern down saw at once it was a small white-painted

boat's water barrico with black hoops. He rolled it over with his foot to see if it was empty, and as he did so some half-obliterated lettering upon it caught his eye. Bending down to examine more closely he gave a low whistle of surprise, for, indistinct as the painted words were, there was no mistaking them.

"... CK ARROW" in black letters upon the white surface stared up at him!

"Here's another proof," he remarked to Roger in a whisper; "the people who were in this cave must have belonged to the *Black Arrow*! There's no mistaking that, is there?"

"By George, no!" exclaimed the other. "I should jolly well think not!"

The little barrel was quite empty, and the bung was out, and leaving it where it was the boys went cautiously on. Billy still led, keeping one hand on the wall, and as he felt he was still walking in a curve to the left he assumed, quite rightly, that the chamber they were in was roughly-circular in shape.

For some feet they advanced without noting anything else, and Billy had nearly completed the circuit and was just about to turn towards where he imagined the entrance to the passage to be, for the spot of dim daylight coming through the roof was now almost immediately behind him, when he suddenly saw a round white object at his very feet. He held the lantern forward to get a clearer view, and with a muffled exclamation of horror recoiled into Roger's arms, for the latter was close behind. He felt his flesh creeping and his hair standing on end, for the object he had seen was a grinning human skull!

Roger seized the lantern from Billy's hand and stepped forward to have a look, but he, too, saw at once what the object was, and equally terrified stepped back hastily.

At the same moment a low moan, sounding eerie and

weird in the half darkness, resounded through the apartment.

Terrified almost out of their senses the boys huddled together in a horror-stricken silence, hardly daring to breathe. Again and again the fearful sound echoed through the chamber, making them feel as if they had pins and needles all over.

"What is that row?" moaned Roger in a whisper, for he was thoroughly alarmed.

"I don't know," answered Billy, equally frightened. "Perhaps the place is haunted!"

They both quaked while the moaning went on, but presently Billy felt a current of cold air blowing on his face. He could have laughed with relief, for the wind accounted for the terrifying sound.

"It's all right," he whispered to Roger. "The wind has got up and is howling down that chimney thing behind us. That's what's making this horrible row."

"Thank goodness!" gasped Roger, feeling very relieved at the explanation. After a time Billy's terror left him, and overcoming his natural repugnance with a great effort, he took the lantern and crept forward. He had thought, on first seeing the skull, that it was there by itself, but a closer examination revealed the fact that it was still attached to a body lying on a heap of mouldering canvas, and with the head resting on a pile of clothing. The trunk was covered over with what appeared to be the remains of a dark-blue greatcoat, now green and discoloured with age, while close by lay an ancient-looking flintlock musket, the wooden portions of which had rotted away in parts, and a large formidable-looking double-barrelled pistol of an ancient type. On the other side of the pallet lay an open book, the pages of which were yellow with age, an old-fashioned powder horn, a lantern with horn sides, another coconut-shell drinking cup, a

handsome jug, subsequently found to be of silver, a small canvas bag containing bullets, while several gold and silver coins were strewn about loose on the ground.

"Who is it, d'you think?" asked Roger in an awed whisper.

"Don't know," answered Billy, "but I think it must have been one of the pirates. I think I'd better take the cloak off him; perhaps his clothes will tell us something."

Billy felt horribly nervous and squeamish, but summoning up his courage took hold of a corner of the coat and attempted to pull it aside. The rotting fabric promptly tore to pieces in his hand, but he presently succeeded in bringing to view the object lying underneath.

It was a complete human skeleton, its lower extremities clad in the mouldering remains of what had evidently been a pair of leather sea boots; while shreds of discoloured cloth, one or two of them with tarnished brass buttons still attached, hung on the bleaching bones. Beyond that there was no clue as to who the man had been, and as there was nothing further to be gained by a fuller investigation Billy re-covered the remains.

"Poor chap!" he said in a whisper, having completed the gruesome task to his satisfaction. "He evidently died after living here for some time."

"Perhaps that book will tell us who he was," suggested Roger, pointing to the other side of the rough bed on which the skeleton lay. "I vote we take it and go away. I'm sick of this awful place," he added with a shudder.

"So am I," agreed Billy. "Let us clear out as soon as we can."

He crept cautiously round the pallet so as not to disturb the remains, and after picking up the book, jug, and scattered coins, rejoined his companion. They had already secured the three silver forks and were about to leave the

cave when Billy suddenly stopped. "Roger," he said over his shoulder, "you might bring along the pistol and musket."

"Whatever d'you want them for?" grumbled the other.

"They may come in useful," explained Billy, "and I've an idea that I may be able to rig 'em up as alarm guns to tell us if the Chinamen come again."

"There's something in that," agreed Roger, procuring the weapons. "Come on, don't let's stay here any longer."

They made their way towards the opening and found it without difficulty, and five minutes later were standing on the beach outside. The wind had increased, and the smooth swell had been converted into a heavy sea which broke on the beach in smothers of foam and showers of wind-flung spray; but they were grateful for the fresh pungent air of the ocean after the fetid earthy atmosphere of the cave, and blinking in the strong light, for the clouds had cleared away and the sun shone brilliantly, they went along the beach towards where their rope hung over the cliff.

"What about having a look at the book," suggested Roger, filled with curiosity.

"Let's leave it till we get back and have had dinner. It's fairly late now, and we ought to get back to Ah Sing. You'd better go up first," Billy added, as they reached the end of the rope, "and then you can haul all these things up."

Roger, assisted by the knots, clambered up without difficulty, and after hauling the weapons and other things they had taken from the cave to the top the rope was lowered again and Billy climbed up it.

"Well, we've done a jolly good forenoon's work," said the latter when, having uprooted the crowbar and coiled the rope, they began their climb.

"I'm dying to find out what's in that book," put in Roger; "perhaps it'll tell us who that fellow was."

"I don't doubt it," said Billy, "but patience is a virtue, and I'm dreadfully hungry, so I vote we leave it till after dinner."

CHAPTER XV

The Log of the "Black Arrow"

HILL FORT was reached without incident, and after the boys had told Ah Sing what they had found, producing the musket and other things from the cave as evidence, they were all three soon busy over the preparations for the next meal. The Chinaman, if the truth must be told, did not seem to take much interest in the results of the expedition, for to him the finding of a human skeleton, even with all the romance of pirates and caves behind it, was a very commonplace and mundane affair. He merely listened to what they had to say, and then shrugged his shoulders with a grunt, and even the book itself, with its mouldering leaves, did not arouse his enthusiasm.

Lukewarm as his interest was, however, it did not affect the boys themselves, and they were both filled with extreme curiosity to see what was written inside. So after a hasty but very satisfactory midday meal they sat down side by side and began their investigation.

The volume itself, bound in what appeared to be coarse canvas, measured about twelve by eight inches, and as soon as they opened it they saw at once it was a ship's logbook. Upon the flyleaf was a space for the name of the ship, and here, written in ink, now so yellow and faded as to be almost indecipherable, was the name *Black Arrow*. Below this came the printed words "From" and "To", the space opposite the former being filled in with the date,

29th November, 1824, from which the book had been kept. Turning over, they perceived the pages were printed in the ordinary manner of a ship's log. Those on the left had, near the edges, a vertical row of figures running from one to twelve, representing the hours a.m. and p.m., while other columns were appropriated to "Distance run by log", "Course", "Leeway", "Weather", "Barometer", &c. &c. In the middle of each left-hand page were spaces headed "Latitude and Longitude at Noon" "Course and Distance made good", "Set and Drift of Current", &c., and all these had been scrupulously entered in ink. Upon the right-hand pages the paper was left clear for remarks, and here again the sheets were covered with writing, all in the same neat hand.

It was evidently the fair log, copied each day from the rough log kept on deck, and whoever had written it up had done so with a methodical and seamanlike precision which showed that if even the *Black Arrow* had been a pirate, her safe navigation, at any rate, had been regarded as of primary importance. Billy had often seen Mr. Hardcastle filling in a similar document on board the *Saracen*, but here was a log which was every bit as neat and as well kept as his.

Brief laconic sentences showed the work which had been carried on on board, the weather experienced, land sighted, and the hundred-and-one other daily occurrences of life at sea, and for the first few pages there was nothing at all unusual in the entries to attract the boys' attention. The space was filled with such remarks as "Shortened sail to topsails", "Light airs and cloudy", "Calm, employed re-staying foremast and blacking down aloft", "Employed shifting main topsail which was split in the morning watch", &c. &c., all of which happenings, trivial enough in themselves, go to make the life at sea, even nowadays, a busy one. It was not until they had read on as far as the

entries under 9th December that Billy saw something which made his heart give a sudden jump.

"D'you see this?" he asked, with ill-suppressed excitement. "They were proper pirates after all!"

Roger followed his finger and read:

"5 a.m. Daylight. Moderate S.W. breeze. Ship under plain sail. Sighted barque close ahead. Hoisted British colours, stranger showed Portuguese.

"5.32. Overhauled and hailed barque—*Santa Catarina* of Macao—and asked Lat. and Long.

"5.37. Barque backed main topsail and sent boat. Captured crew of do.

"5.45. Hoisted black flag, ran guns out and fired across stranger's bows. Ran in and boarded.

"6.10. Barque surrendered. Very rich prize.

"Employed shifting cargo throughout forenoon and afternoon. 2000 bales China silk, great quantities sandal wood, nutmeg, spices, and ivory. 14 chests church plate. 15,400 silver dollars. Prisoners—14 in no.—set adrift in long boat."

The entries for the day concluded by remarking, opposite 9.15 p.m.:

"Scuttled prize. Filled and stood off N.W. Moderate breeze and cloudy. Died this day in the fight the Bosn. Jake Travers, 1 mulatto—Jas. English. Committed bodies to the deep. Division at capstan head. A good day's work."

It was evident from this that the captain of the *Black Arrow* followed the usual piratical custom of sharing out all money captured as soon as it had been taken.

"What bloodthirsty brutes!" exclaimed Roger angrily. "D'you see they say they put the prisoners adrift in a boat?"

"Jolly lucky they weren't made to walk the plank," remarked Billy, who had read about the doings of pirates. "Those sort of fellows didn't stick at much."

They continued their investigation, and here and there

the entries in the log became more personal, the writer mentioning on one occasion "My share of the day's proceeds 1345 silver dollars, whereat I was pleased".

Without a doubt the *Black Arrow* with her cut-throat crew had been a recognized pirate, and on one occasion, 24th January, 1825, she had actually been chased by a British frigate, but had succeeded in escaping by the old-time method of lowering a lighted cask overboard at night, and then steering off in another direction, a ruse which outwitted her pursuer.

By far the greater portion of her nefarious career seemed to have been spent in attacking peaceable traders, European and Chinese alike, for entry after entry showed that harmless vessels had been attacked, looted, and then either scuttled or burnt. Time after time the pirates had reaped a rich harvest, for all the loot had been systematically entered in the log in the same clerkly handwriting. Once or twice, too, the remarks showed that the crews of the trading vessels had offered a desperate resistance, and that the robbers had nearly been foiled in their predatory exploits, but on all such occasions the simple statement, "Prisoners despatched", showed only too well the fate which had overtaken the brave men who had been fighting valiantly for their lives and property. Everywhere the horrible record was written with absolute fidelity and accuracy, and the terrible bald statements, covering all sorts of unspeakable outrages and tortures committed on the hapless victims, made both boys shudder with horror.

The more perishable portions of the *Black Arrow*'s loot seemed to have been disposed of by barter with the natives at various unfrequented ports in neighbouring islands, and on more than one occasion it would appear as if the pirates had landed to attack and seize the riches of some native chief.

March 18th, 1825, was the last day written up in ink,

The Boy Castaways

but for three pages on the right-hand sheets were covered with **hastily ill-scrawled words in pencil.** Here and there the damp had soaked through, and had rendered the never very distinct writing almost illegible, but filling in the gaps as best they could, though sometimes it was quite impossible to do so, the boys succeeded in making out the following, which is a transcript of the copy written out by Billy shortly afterwards:—

“On March 20th at daylight we did find ourselves hard by the island, near by which we was chased by the **Endeavour Sloop**, two years since. Strong gale with heavy sea, ship under close reefed tops'l's. At 9 of the morn the main topmast did break off at the cap. Wore ship under head sails and ran before the tempest. At 10 a heavy sea did destroy the rudder. Attempted to rig jury do, when 4 men was wash'd overboard. Ship unmanageable, and did endeavour to come to with port bower. No bottom with Hare's Ears close a'lee, and driving on, unable to . . . did run ashore and **becom' fast wedg'd betwixt the Ears.**

“The Capt'n and all souls, save **Potter**, the mulatto cook, and **myself**, was drown'd, but by the mercy of God we clung to wreckage, and was wash'd ashore in the bay hard by the Ears. Did find the cave. In the even'g the tempest did abate, and we did embark in the long boat, which by God's mercy had wash'd ashore, and did go off to the wreck. Did find her much broken by the sea, but did find food and muskets, and was employ'd carrying away much of . . . (here the original becomes hopelessly obliterated for two lines) and the plate in the great cabin. Brought also this booke in which I write.

“March 21. This morn did Potter, the mulatto, and myself take the long boat and did bury . . . hard by the . . . western island. After much toil dispos'd of it . . . cave.

“March 22. This morn did find myself ailing of a grievous fever, what is a return . . . did suffer a year since . . . Potter and mulatto did agree to take boat and sail . . . did depart at noon, agree to come back for . . . Did . . . in cave.

“March 23. Fever worse. Did crawl to beach. Strong wind and sea. No signs of ship. Fear Potter and mulatto perish'd. Wreckage on beach.

“March 24. This morn did find myself sorely ailing. Did rise for food . . . weak to eat. Did lie . . . water.

"March 25. Fear 'tis over . . . far gone to 'Tis dark.
Potter and mulatto not Wind howls, sea

"March 26. . . . feeble to write

"JAMES LITTLE.

"2 Mate."

The last few words were evidently written when the man was in the last throes of fever, for the letters were very shaky. But below them again, and scrawled in large letters, as if the poor wretch had had temporarily recovered and had utilized all his remaining strength in committing it to paper, appeared the following lines of doggerel:

"Keep the **beacon** in the line with the great upstanding cone,
When the star doth brightly shine over the great whiten'd stone,
Then at last you are upon the **treasure** of the crafty Don."

Below this again appeared the beginnings of the *Black Arrow's* crest, the inevitable skull and crossed arrows. But the design had never been completed, and having exhausted his strength the writer had apparently laid down his pencil and died, for this was the page at which the book had been open when the boys found it.

Billy and Roger read through the strange document with their mouths opening wider and wider with astonishment as they went on.

"Whew!" whistled the former excitedly, hardly able to contain himself. "There's no doubt they brought the treasure ashore with 'em and buried it."

"Yes," cried Roger. "I was just going to say so. The fellow who wrote this, James Little—it must have been his skeleton we saw in the cave—is constantly talking about it. Let's see," he added, turning back a page. "Where's the line I was looking for?"

"Here we are," he went on, finding the place. "He says: 'but did find food and muskets, and was employ'd

The Boy Castaways

carrying away much of . . .', then I can't read any more for a bit."

"The question is," put in Billy, "what were they carrying away? You see farther on he says: 'and the plate in the great cabin'. Looks as if the plate had something to do with what they were taking out of the ship, doesn't it?"

Roger nodded. "Yes," he said, "if they did go back to the wreck the chances are ten to one they took the most valuable things. It's only natural, isn't it?"

Billy assented. "And," he went on to say, "d'you remember in the log when we read about the Portuguese barque it said—let's see, what was it? Oh, yes, here it is: 'great quantities sandal wood, nutmeg, spices, and ivory. ~~14~~ ¹⁴ chests church plate.' Now d'you think that may have been the plate they took ashore?"

"Shouldn't at all wonder," replied Roger; "it seems quite likely. I wonder though if three of 'em could manage fourteen chests?" he added as an afterthought.

"H'm! I don't know," answered Billy, "but they may have made more than one trip in the boat, for all we know. At any rate, farther on, this chap Little says: 'This morn did Potter, the mulatto, and myself take the long boat and did bury', then there's a gap, and then comes 'hard by the', then another gap, and then 'western island. After much toil dispos'd of it'. What d'you make of it all?"

"I'm trying to think, but I'm blowed if I can suggest anything. It seems pretty certain that something valuable was landed, but Little's left all the important parts out, or rather, we can't read them. Beastly nuisance!"

Billy grinned. "What I think happened is this," he explained. "The three of 'em brought the stuff ashore in the boat and spent the next day burying it. The question is, Where? D'you think, though, that by 'western

island' he means the western half of the island? You know," he added, "the place is almost divided into two by the stream."

"That's true enough," murmured Roger. "Half a mo', though; I've been puzzling over something else. What does he mean by the *Hare's Ears*?"

"Oh, there's no mistaking them; they're those two peculiar-shaped rocks, and the *Black Arrow* evidently got stuck between 'em. It seems quite possible."

Roger nodded to show he understood.

"Well, let's suppose," went on Billy, "that they buried the stuff somewhere in the western half of the island?"

"Yes."

"Well, this rhyme—I wonder how long it took him to make it up—is evidently written for some purpose, and it's my idea that it shows where the treasure is buried. Do you follow?"

"But why should Little have wanted to let people know whereabouts it was?" objected Roger.

"Perhaps he thought that the others who went away in the boat might possibly come back. You see he knew the island was uninhabited, and the chances were a hundred to one that nobody else would find the cave. He was right to a certain extent, for it hasn't been discovered for nearly a hundred years, and then only by a fluke."

"Let's have another look at the rhyme," suggested Roger.

They read the doggerel again.

"The beacon," said Roger, "is probably the one we found the other day, but what on earth does he mean by the 'great upstanding cone'?"

Billy thought hard for a moment. "I have it!" he cried. "The cone is this very hill. It's the only conical thing in the island, or at any rate, the only upstanding one!"

"By gum! So it is!"

"Well, the long and short of it is," continued the other, "the stuff is buried somewhere on the line joining the top of this hill to the place where we found the beacon. The 'whitened stone' is that peculiar light-coloured rock on Boulder Point. I've noticed it time after time."

"That works out all right," agreed Roger. "But," he added, in a rather dubious voice, "what about the star he talks about? 'When the star doth brightly shine over the great whiten'd stone' he quoted from the book. 'What particular star does he mean, for goodness' sake? The whole sky's full of 'em!'" he concluded with a hopeless gesture.

"That stumps me," said Billy in a rather disappointed tone, "and as far as I can see it'll take a lot of thinking out. It's jolly funny, though, that he talks about a star when, according to the book, they must have buried the stuff in the daytime when no stars are visible. He distinctly says: 'This morn did Potter, the mulatto, and myself', &c., doesn't he?"

"The whole thing's jolly mysterious," said Roger, wrinkling his brow with a puzzled expression. "I can't make head or tail of it, but when we've got time we might go down and dig about a bit and see if we can't come across something. Why shouldn't we have a shot at it now?"

"Too late," said Billy, "we shall have to take the boat round when we do go—we'll never break through all that bush—and if we started now it woud be nearly dark by the time we arrived. No, let's go and have a proper hunt round when we've more time to spare. To-morrow," he added regretfully, for, like Roger, he was desperately keen to go treasure hunting, "we ought to get on with putting up those new tents. We shall be caught with our boots off when the rainy season comes if we don't make a start."

"Right you are!" agreed Roger; "but I'm awfully anxious to see if anything really is buried. It's all so jolly exciting, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, but we're only supposing the stuff is buried," laughed Billy; "we don't know for certain. Even if it is, we haven't a ghost of a notion whereabouts it is."

• • • • •
Ah Sing's day of rest had wrought wonders in his condition, for at the end of the afternoon he surprised the boys by announcing that he was quite well again. Billy was glad to hear it, for to him the Chinaman's injuries had seemed too serious to be got over in twenty-four hours, and as by this time they had both come to look upon his help as a matter of course, the loss of it, even for two or three days, would have been a serious matter.

By sunset it was really blowing hard, and Billy's prediction about the rain, too, turned out to be correct, for soon after supper the sky became overcast, and constant rain squalls began to drive down from windward.

They went to bed early, but it was not to sleep, for the canvas over their heads strained and sagged in the force of the blast, and more than once, when heavier gusts came howling in from seaward, they thought the tents would be torn from their fastenings and blown bodily over the cliff. Several times Billy and Roger wriggled out of their shelter and added more heavy stones to those holding the edges of the erection in place, but though these did help to keep it in place, the taut canvas was soon dripping wet, and before long the rain was coming through in little rivulets.

They were in for a miserable night, and Billy bitterly regretted not having spent the day in putting up more habitable sleeping places, for they were soon lying in a veritable quagmire, having omitted to dig a trench round

the tent to collect the water running off its sides. Luckily for them, however, the rain ceased at about midnight or they would have been flooded out completely, and in spite of the howling and whistling of the wind they succeeded in getting a few hours' sleep.

They were all awake early the next morning, and when Billy crept out of the sodden shelter in which he and Roger had succeeded in keeping themselves fairly dry with successive layers of canvas, he found the sky had cleared. It was still blowing a fresh gale, however, and the flagstaff, more firmly secured this time, bent like a fishing rod in the howling gusts with the red ensign at its summit blowing out as stiff as a board. The usually calm sea had become a heaving grey-green expanse, flecked and streaked with the white foam of the breaking billows, while down below on the reef the spectacle was magnificent, for the gigantic wind-driven breakers hurled themselves on the rocks with such appalling fury that their flying spray was flung far to leeward on the wings of the gale.

Breakfast was not a happy event, for the wood was damp from the rain of the night before and obstinately refused to burn, so they had to content themselves with cold food left over from the night before. Still, it was better than nothing, and when the meal was over, the summit of the hill speedily assumed a likeness to a laundry drying ground, for they rigged up a line from which all their sodden garments and bedding fluttered in the breeze.

Billy and Roger had already been discussing plans for the new hut, and between them they had determined to put up another canvas erection stretched tight over an interior framework of bamboo. It was to be built in the form of a tent, with sides sloping right down to the ground, while the ends of the bamboo supports were to be buried deep in the ground to prevent the completed affair being overturned by the wind. When finished, it was to be

painted, and this, the boys hoped, if they also took the precaution of digging a trench right round, would make the erection fairly comfortable and dry even in bad weather.

"Roger," said Billy, "you might amuse yourself this morning by finding that large piece of canvas we were looking at the other day; the bit of the spare topsail, I mean. It's already sewn together, and ought to do splendidly for the sides of the tent. Take it to the bottom of the cliff near the pulley, and then get hold of a couple of those pots of white paint. They're somewhere in the hut."

"Right you are! d'you want me to hoist the canvas up?"

"No. I'll go along with Ah Sing to cut some bamboos for the supports. We'll probably be able to get 'em from that clump down by the stream, so we'll hoist 'em up with the pulley at the same time as your canvas, so as to make one job of it. I'm afraid you'll have to carry the paint up, though."

"Right-o! I'm quite strong enough to manage that, I think," replied Roger, with a grin.

Soon afterwards all three of them went down the hill and separated for their different tasks. Roger walked off along the beach to find his canvas, while Billy, accompanied by Ah Sing with their two rifles, and carrying the hatchet himself, went inland along the left bank of the stream. They walked through the passage the boys had cut in the thick bush some time before and soon came to the spot where the bamboos grew thickest, and selecting a likely-looking clump, Billy commenced operations.

The valley was quite sheltered from the wind and was abominably hot, and chopping the tough stems was no easy work, particularly as the edge of the axe was none too sharp. Billy was not sorry, therefore, when, after he had been at work about ten minutes, Ah Sing volunteered

his assistance, for even that short spell had made him weary and had made the perspiration run down his face in streams. They accordingly took turn and turn about with the hatchet, and an hour's hard work saw them with enough material for their purpose. The heads of the bamboos were then lopped off, and this done, the next thing was to get them to the pulley at the foot of the cliff. This was a rather more difficult job than they had bargained for, for the spars were fully twenty feet in length, and though fairly light, had to be taken singly and pushed and coaxed through the thickly-planted tree trunks and the dense masses of the tangled creepers and undergrowth. After much struggling, however, and by dint of making themselves much hotter than they already were, the task was eventually accomplished, and tying all the spars in a large bundle they made them fast to the rope ready for hoisting to the summit of the hill.

Roger had already deposited his roll of canvas near the foot of the cliff, and by this time was probably halfway up the hill with the paint, and as there was no real need for great haste, Billy and Ah Sing, after securely lashing the canvas to the bamboos, sauntered off towards the stream to rest after their exertions. They slaked their burning thirst with the delicious cool water, and then, each procuring a handful of plantains from the tree growing near, sat on the bank eating them with relish. The juicy fruit tasted doubly good, for breakfast had been a sketchy meal and they were both hungry. Billy had disposed of four, and was thinking to himself that it would be an excellent idea if they could take a big bunch of the fruit up to Hill Fort when they returned, when a sudden shout made him start.

“What's that?” he asked.

“B'long Massa Loger, my tink,” said Ah Sing.

“What does he want, I wonder?” grumbled Billy to himself, for he was very comfortable and was just feeling

nicely cool. "I suppose he's dropped the paint or something. Oh blow!" he added, as another wild yell came from the top of the hill. "I suppose I'd better go and find out what the chap wants."

He rose to his feet unwillingly, and leaving Ah Sing sitting by the stream, sauntered off through the wood in the direction of the pulley, for Roger seemed to be shouting over the edge of the cliff. The bawling got more distinct as he went on.

"Billy, where are you? Billy! Billee!"

"All right, keep your hair on, I'm coming. You needn't shout your head off!" called back Billy, pushing his way through the last belt of undergrowth. "Now what's the excitement up there?" he demanded, looking up and seeing Roger's head sticking out over the edge of the cliff far away above him. "All right, I'm here, what's the matter?" he shouted again, funnelling his hands to make the sound carry, for the boy on the summit had evidently not heard his last remarks.

"Come up here quickly!" Roger bawled back excitedly. "There's a big ship in sight, quite close."

Billy needed no second intimation, and dashing back through the undergrowth found Ah Sing still sitting down by the stream.

"Come on," was all he had time to gasp excitedly, seizing his rifle, "there's a ship in sight!"

The Chinaman did not grasp what the boy said, but seeing him snatch up his weapon and tear off through the wood as if he was being pursued by a whole army of pirates, came to the conclusion that something had happened and that he had better do likewise, so taking up his own rifle he began to run after the boy with a heavy lumbering trot.

How Billy got up the hill he never quite realized; but seeing Roger had torn the flagstaff out of its hole and was

The Boy Castaways

waving it to and fro with all his might to attract attention, made him hurry all the more.

It was still blowing a gale, and the long bamboo with the flag at the end of it was almost more than the boy could manage, and at any time Billy expected to see the whole affair filched from his hands and blown over the edge of the cliff, but puffing and panting, with Ah Sing lumbering along far behind, he dashed on as fast as he could.

The slope seemed interminable, and now when haste was really necessary his progress seemed exasperatingly slow, for all the boulders appeared to have got in his way on purpose, while the rain of the night before had made the short turf more slippery than ever.

His heart felt as if it was bursting by the time he reached the breastwork, but clambering over it he dashed on to where Roger was waving the flag. He had no breath to talk; he could only look, and there, barely more than a mile and a half away to the southward, and steering to the south-westward with all sail set, was a large three-masted barque.

CHAPTER XVI

The Ship

“Do you think she sees us?” panted Billy anxiously, as soon as he had regained his breath.

“She must have,” said Roger hopefully; “she’s only a little over a mile off. Get the telescope and have a look and see if she’s got an ensign up; perhaps she’ll dip it if she sees my waving.”

Billy rushed off to the tent and returned with the glass, which he levelled and focused on the stranger.

“Well, do you see anything?” asked Roger impatiently.

“No, she’s got no ensign up; but she can’t help having seen us, though. There are a lot of people on her poop and they seem to be doing something to the spanker.”

“Let’s have a look,” said Roger, dropping the flagstaff he had been agitating and reaching across for the telescope.

The vessel, a large black-hulled three-masted barque with a broad white ribbon set with a row of imitation ports, was almost due south of Cape Martin, and was steering to the south-westward with every inch of canvas set to the favouring gale. Her captain, whoever he was, was evidently driving her regardless of consequences and to what seemed to be a dangerous extent, for she was pitching violently in the heavy sea until at times her bows almost disappeared under water in a smother of foam. Every now and then she threatened to be pooped by an enormous liquid hillock rolling down from astern, but the man steer-

The Boy Castaways

ing her obviously knew his business, for though every sail was set, even to the royals, she hardly shipped a drop of water aft, although the tops of the waves seemed to be coming over the bulwarks amidships.

"There she goes!" suddenly shouted Roger, as he saw a rag of coloured bunting climbing up to the gaff. "The Stars and Stripes!" he exclaimed an instant later, as the red, white, and blue of the familiar flag blew out in the following breeze.

"Thank heaven!" murmured Billy thankfully. "If she's American, she'll not sail on and leave us. Oh thank heaven!" he repeated, from the bottom of his heart.

By this time Ah Sing had joined them and was himself staring at the ship, but both the boys were too intent upon watching to take any notice of him.

"It's the Stars and Stripes all right," said Roger, handing the telescope across. "Have a look for yourself."

Billy took the proffered glass and gazed intently at the barque. "She's got a signal of some kind hoisted at the mizzen masthead," he observed excitedly. "I can't make out the flags though."

"Wouldn't be much use if you could, we haven't got the Signal Book."

"No," agreed Billy, "I forgot that. Take the flag again, though, and wave it for all you're worth!"

Roger seized the flagstaff, and raising it with an effort waved it to and fro in the air.

"Hurrah! She's seen us!" yelled Billy, noticing the ensign lowered halfway down and then hoisted up again. "She's seen us! She's seen us!" He was almost frantic with excitement and began capering about in glee.

"I wonder what she'll do now?" asked Roger.

"Steer up to the northward and get under the lee of the island," said Billy confidently. "She can't possibly lower a boat where she is now, there's much too much sea."

"Hadn't we better go down so as to be ready when her boat comes in?" suggested the other. "How on earth we're going to get across to the other part of the island I don't quite know," he added.

"Let's stay here and see what she does," Billy advised. "She ought to be shortening sail at any minute now, for she'll never be able to haul up to windward with all that canvas set."

Still the vessel swept on, but though Billy looked intently at her through the telescope he saw no signs of men going aloft preparatory to shortening sail. On and on she went, passing Saracen Cove, Mulready Point, and Hardcastle Bay in turn, but still she made no sign of altering course to get in under the lee of the land.

"It's jolly funny," remarked Billy, looking attentively at the flying ship, "she ought to alter course now if she's going to do it at all. There's nobody aloft even; surely they won't be such fools as to try to haul up into the wind with all that sail on her."

They gazed at the barque for a few minutes without speaking.

"She can't be going to leave us," faltered Billy at length, with a sudden horrible feeling of doubt in his heart.

"Of course not," said Roger confidently; "she dipped her ensign, and she wouldn't go on after doing that. Perhaps they'll wait till the wind goes down a bit."

Billy did not feel convinced, but said nothing.

"There!" exclaimed Roger soon afterwards. "Surely she's hauling up to the northward now!"

The barque certainly did seem to be turning her bows towards them, and Billy's hope revived, but a second or two later he saw she must have merely been yawning in her course, for her broadside vanished again as she turned back and swept on in the original direction.

Both boys were too intent upon watching her to say very much, but all the time the ship was gradually drawing away.

They gazed at her with longing; would she never alter course?

The suspense became almost intolerable, and Billy felt as if he wanted to give way to his pent-up feelings by shouting at the pitch of his lungs, but controlling himself with an effort, and trembling violently in his excitement, he still kept his eyes fixed on the flying ship.

He closed his eyelids while he counted a hundred, but when he opened them again the barque was still scudding away on the same course. Still he did not give up hope, for there was a chance, an almost impossible chance, that she might yet come to their assistance.

The sight of the ship had sent an intense longing surging through his mind; a longing to return to civilization and the companionship of others besides his comrades in distress, and he thought to himself that he would barter anything, absolutely anything, if only the vessel would turn round and pick them up. But still she dashed on to leeward until she had left the island some distance astern, and then he suddenly realized for certain that she was sailing away.

He felt absolutely desperate, an awful overpowering agony seemed to be gnawing at his heart, and once again the confines of the island seemed so narrow. When he had seen the ensign dipped he had made certain they were about to be rescued, but now all his hopes had been dashed to the ground. He felt the tears of disappointment rising to his eyes; a horrible hard lump came into his throat, and it was only the thought of Ah Sing behind him that prevented him giving way to his woe in actual tears.

"She's going," he managed to say to Roger in a choking whisper. "Don't blub, man!" he added, for he saw

his companion's face getting crimson with the effort of keeping back the rising flood. "What'll Ah Sing think?"

Roger controlled his feelings with an effort, for he was on the verge of a breakdown and felt that a good cry would do him good, but some moments passed before he could trust himself to speak.

"Brutes!" he ejaculated at length, with a suspicious quaver in his voice. "Fancy leaving us like this! They must have seen us. Why did they dip their ensign? I do call them beasts!" His face started quivering and he brushed back the rising tears with an impatient gesture.

Billy was hard put to conceal his own bitter disappointment, and he knew that if Roger succumbed to his feelings he would instinctively follow suit and do the same. But he realized it was no good crying over spilt milk, and, above all, he did not wish Ah Sing to think him a mere child. He was a man, and had been doing a man's work, and he vowed he would not give way.

"You shouldn't call 'em brutes," he observed to his companion.

"Why not?" exclaimed Roger angrily. "Why aren't they brutes? We might be starving for all they know, and they've sailed away and left us!"

"Yes, but you must remember there's a very heavy sea running, and it's much bigger than it seems from up here."

"Any ordinary person would have had a shot at picking us up," declared Roger. "I'm jolly certain Father wouldn't have sailed past an island with people on it if he knew they wanted help."

"I don't know so much about that," began Billy, "he _____"

Roger flared up at once. "What do you mean?" he almost shouted. "D'you mean to tell me he was a murderer?"

"Don't talk such rot," said Billy calmly. "You're

always losing your hair about nothing at all, and then say I've said something to annoy you. What I was going to say was that your father was a good seaman, and that I rather doubt if it would have been a seamanlike thing to do to try to heave to in this gale. Just think of the risk."

"Why did you say you thought she'd pick us up then?" retorted Roger. "Why did you say it if you didn't mean it? Tell me that."

"I'm afraid I was hoping so hard that she would that I didn't realize what a risky job it 'ud be."

"Puff! Why risky, I should like to know? Any decent seaman would have had a shot at it."

"Well, I don't think so; there's a jolly big sea on, and if she had tried to haul up into the wind she might have had the masts torn out of her."

"That's only what you think," snorted Roger contemptuously, quite forgetting that Billy knew a great deal more about it than he did.

"Well, don't for goodness' sake let's fight over it," said Billy with a forced smile; "it's no earthly use getting ratty about it, is it?"

Roger looked glum and did not reply.

"Come on, cheer up," urged his friend, anxious to make him forget his disappointment. "It's no use going about with a face like a sea boot even if the blooming old ship has gone on and left us. Look at Ah Sing, he doesn't seem to mind."

The Chinaman was busy tidying up the camp with an expression of utter indifference on his face. "Wa b'long?" he asked, coming forward on hearing his name mentioned.

"I said you didn't seem to care whether the ship picked us up or not," explained Billy.

Ah Sing grinned. "My no wanchee go ship," he re-

marked. "My likee dis islan' orl lite. Plenty chow, plenty slip, b'long numba one."

Roger could not help smiling in spite of himself.

"That's better," said Billy approvingly, laughing himself. "You're not a pretty sight when you put on that sea-boot expression of yours."

"Oh, don't be such a silly ass," answered Roger, playfully hitting his friend on the shoulder and not quite knowing whether to be angry or amused. "I can't help being disappointed."

"Of course not, but it's not so bad as you try to make out. After all, as Ah Sing says, this is a jolly good island to live on as islands go. We've plenty of grub and all that sort of thing."

"Grub! that reminds me," returned Roger, who had the knack of always feeling hungry, "it must be nearly dinner-time, and I'm jolly hungry."

"Trust you for that!" observed his companion, "but I vote we have food all the same."

As they ate they watched the ship gradually getting smaller and smaller as she sailed away towards the southwest. She was travelling fast, and in half an hour her towering pyramid of canvas was only visible as a white blur against the blue sky on the horizon. Ten minutes later she was hull down; the white blur became fainter and fainter as she receded into the dim distance, and then a solitary pin point of white with the sun shining on it alone remained to tell of her presence. In five minutes even this had faded away, and nothing remained save the rigid line of demarcation betwixt sky and sea.

She had gone.

Billy felt terribly depressed and unhappy, and once more he experienced that awful feeling of loneliness, but turning aside with a sigh he went to put the telescope back in the tent.

"Come on, you two," he remarked with forced cheer-

fulness as he emerged, "it's high time we made a move. Shove the flagstaff up again, and then we'll get on with building the new tent."

They had little real enthusiasm for the work after their recent bitter disappointment, and Ah Sing was the only one of the three who seemed to be in his ordinary spirits, but by the middle of the afternoon they had made good progress with the inner framework of the new habitation. The bamboos had been sawn into lengths of about fifteen feet and had been lashed together in pairs about a foot from the top, enough slack being left in the lashings to allow the long ends to be opened out. When five of these supports had been made the ground was measured out and two rows of deep holes dug, the cavities themselves being about four feet apart. The long ends of the bamboos were then opened out and put in the holes, and when all five supports had been secured and the earth filled in the holes, another long bamboo to serve as a ridge pole was placed in the V-shaped opening above the points where the supports crossed, and securely lashed.

It was not a very difficult job, the hardest work of all being the sawing up of the spars and the digging of the holes, and by sundown they had the satisfaction of seeing the interior framing complete. When finished it would be a far more habitable and roomy concern than the old tent, for it would be in the shape of an inverted V, with its apex nine feet off the ground level, while the floor space would measure approximately fifteen by sixteen feet. When the canvas had been nailed to the spars and given two coats of paint, a trench dug all round, and guys fitted to the tops of the bamboos to help take the strain when it blew hard, they hoped the tent would be impervious to rain and tolerably secure, and though not perhaps quite so commodious as the old hut down by the stream, far better in every way than the ramshackle shelters they had been

accustomed to since taking up their residence on the top of the hill.

By noon the next day the canvas had been nailed in place and the little dwelling was complete, and after the usual midday meal Billy set to work to manufacture his alarm guns, leaving Roger and Ah Sing busy with their paint pots and brushes.

He first proceeded to take to pieces the two weapons they had found in the cave, and though the interior mechanisms were badly rusted he was able, with the assistance of a little oil, some dry sand, and a great deal of elbow grease, to put them into something like working order. It is true that even by the time he had finished tinkering with them the two ancient firearms would hardly have served for purposes of defence, but for the scheme he had in his mind they were quite reliable enough, for he had succeeded in making the triggers and hammers work with a tolerable degree of certainty. Both weapons, as we have already said, were fitted with flint locks, and in both the flints themselves were still gripped in the little screw arrangements of the hammers. When, after some difficulty, he withdrew the old charges and bullets with which they were loaded, and cleared the rust from the vents communicating to the chambers, he took the powder out of some of the shot-gun cartridges and reloaded them carefully. This done he carried them down the hill and lashed them firmly to two trees, and cocking the hammers attached the ends of two long pieces of twine to the respective triggers. Walking off to what he considered a safe distance in case the weapons should explode, and unreeling the twine as he went, he lay down behind a convenient palm, and then gave the string secured to the musket a sharp tug.

The result exceeded his expectations, for the old weapon went off with a shattering roar. The whole wood was

The Boy Castaways

instantly in an uproar, for the birds, scared out of their lives by the sudden and quite unexpected report, left their branches and fled from the place in dismay with a screeching, chattering babel of indignation. Billy jerked the string attached to the pistol and again there was a loud bang, and going up to it he found the right barrel had gone off satisfactorily. The left hammer, for some reason, was out of order, but he did not trouble to set it right, as for his purpose the two weapons were quite efficient enough. He then began to untie them from the trees for the purpose of reloading when he heard the sound of excited yells from the direction of the hill.

"Oh, lor'!" he chuckled to himself. "I clean forgot to tell 'em I was going to try experiments."

Five minutes later, when he was busy extracting the necessary powder from some more cartridges, he heard the sound of someone rushing along the beach full pelt, and looking round saw Roger, hatless, and armed with a rifle, dashing along as fast as he could. Behind him lumbered Ah Sing, his brown face glistening with beads of perspiration, and both of them seemed to be in a terrible state of agitation.

"What's the matter?" gasped Roger, catching sight of Billy. "Where are they?"

"Where are who?"

"The people who fired of course," panted the other, clutching his rifle and looking round fiercely.

"I've only been trying the alarm guns," explained Billy with a giggle. "Sorry I didn't tell you chaps I was going to—you look rather hot."

"Sorry!" exclaimed Roger, breathing heavily to regain his wind. "We suddenly noticed you'd left the hill, and the next thing we heard was two shots. I knew they didn't come from your rifle because of the row they made, and I thought they'd come back."

"Who—the pirates?" queried Billy with a broad grin.

"Um!" nodded Roger, plumping himself on the ground and mopping his heated face with a rag that usually did duty as a handkerchief.

"What have you done to your face?" shouted Billy an instant later, roaring with laughter, for the other boy, forgetting he had been using his "handkerchief" as a paint rag, had been wiping his face with the selfsame article until he looked like an Indian brave on the warpath.

"What's the matter with my face?" he demanded angrily. "Don't stand there grinning like a silly ass!"

"It's all streaked with white paint!" sniggered Billy. "You've no idea how jolly funny you look!"

Even Ah Sing joined in the merriment, hot as he was.

"Massa Loger b'long orl same numba one debbil!" he remarked, showing his white teeth in a grin of amusement.

"Blow!" exclaimed Roger, looking at his handkerchief in dismay. "I forgot I'd been using the beastly thing for wiping my brush."

"Never mind," said Billy, pretending to console him, "it'll wear off in time."

Roger burst out into a peal of laughter, for annoyed as he was he really could not help seeing that it was rather funny, and before long, having succeeded in removing the greater portion of the paint, he was looking at Billy's alarm guns with interest.

"I call it a jolly good scheme," he remarked enthusiastically. "Whereabouts d'you think we'd better put 'em?"

"We'll lash the pistol here," said Billy, pointing to a convenient tree, "and stretch the string tight across the stream and make the other end fast. Then anyone walking up either bank'll walk into it and fire it off, d'you see?"

"I call it a topping idea; the row ought to warn us in plenty of time."

"Yes," continued the other, "and then we'll put the musket farther away to the left, just by those trees." He pointed to the rising land inside Point Wedderburn. "We can make the string fairly long so that they can't help colliding with it somewhere, and then we shall know for certain when to expect an attack. It'll be rather a sell if they don't come after all our preparations," he added.

"How do they go off?" asked Roger.

"I've simply tied the strings to the triggers, and the least touch lets 'em go."

"They're flintlocks, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Well, supposing it comes on to rain and they get wet, what then?"

"By Jove, I'd never thought of that!"

"Well, how'd it be," suggested Roger, "to fit little boxes over the part where the flints are, to keep out the wet?"

"The very thing!" declared Billy, only too pleased to adopt Roger's very sensible suggestion. "I vote we finish them off at once and put 'em up in place."

They spent the rest of the afternoon making various experiments, and by supper-time the alarm guns were finished and lashed to their respective trees.

"Well, we know now," observed Billy as they walked off up the hill on their way back to the fort, "that nobody can come and attack us without our knowing. I didn't think they'd work so well as this."

"No," said Roger; "I wish we had a few more. If anyone does blunder into one of the strings the row when the old thing goes off will scare 'em out of their lives!"

It was a beautiful evening, and the high wind of the day before had lulled into a gentle breeze which barely stirred the folds of the red ensign on its flagstaff. The sea too had gone down, and though at sundown there was still a heavy

swell booming on the beaches, it had greatly lessened in size since the morning.

The sun sank to rest in a wonderful blaze of splendour; every cloud seemed to have vanished, and when at last the tropic night fell, the stars were so bright that the deep-indigo canopy of the sky seemed as if it was sprinkled with innumerable specks of gold and silver.

“By George, it is a ripping evening!” remarked Billy with enthusiasm when, after supper was over and Ah Sing had gone to his shelter, he sat with Roger on the hilltop before turning in.

The other boy sat hunched up with his hands round his knees looking lazily out to sea. “I wish the weather was like this every night,” he remarked. “What’s that lot of stars over there?” he added, pointing towards the northern horizon.

“What, that peculiar square-shaped thing with a sort of tail sticking to it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the Great Bear,” explained Billy, rather proud of his superior knowledge. “Do you see those two stars on the right?”

“On the right of the Great Bear?”

“No, the two forming the right edge of the sort of square.”

“Yes, I see the ones you mean.”

“Well, follow the line joining those two up a bit, and some distance above there’s another bright star, isn’t there?”

“I’ve got it.”

“That’s the Pole Star,” said Billy, “and it hardly changes its position at all, and is always practically due north.”

“I don’t quite see why,” confessed Roger.

“It’s rather difficult to explain, but all the other stars

revolve round it, and it's always practically due north. Mr. Hardcastle often told me so. It's jolly useful, you see, because if you know where the north is you can always find the other points of the compass."

"Yes, I quite see that."

"I remember hearing about a naval officer in Egypt," resumed Billy, "who guided a whole army over the desert simply by looking at the stars. Rather wonderful, wasn't it?"

"Rather!"

There was silence for a minute or two.

"I say, Bill!" Roger suddenly burst out.

"Hallo, what's up?"

"You remember the rhyme in the book?"

"Yes," answered Billy, feeling interested.

"Well, d'you think the star he was talking about could have been the Pole Star?"

"Great Scott," cried Billy excitedly, "why ever not! Let's see. What did it say again? When the star——"

"When the star doth brightly shine over the great whiten'd stone," quoted Roger. "You'll notice," he added, "that he says 'the star'."

"My sainted aunt!" declared Billy. "I believe you've hit it. What on earth made you think of it?"

"I don't quite know. We were talking about stars and then I suddenly remembered the rhyme. It's only a pure guess, though," he added.

"Never mind that," exclaimed Billy. "It gives us something to work on at any rate. The stuff they buried was somewhere on the line joining the top of this hill to the beacon, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's also on the line joining the boulder and the star?"

"Yes."

"Well, if it was the Pole Star he was thinking of when

he made the rhyme, the stuff is buried on the spot on the line joining the hill to the beacon from which the boulder bears due north."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, the Pole Star is always north, and if it was in line with the boulder, the boulder must bear due north as well from the place he talks about. D'you follow?"

"Yes," said Roger rather dubiously. "But it was only an idea of mine that it might be the Pole Star."

"I believe you're right, for all that," said Billy, jumping up in his excitement. "To-morrow, if the weather's decent and the swell's gone down we'll go and have a look and see if we can find the place."

"How are we going to know when the boulder bears north, though?" asked Roger. "We've got no compass."

"Nor we have; I forgot that," said Billy, feeling rather puzzled. "Never mind, though," he added. "We can pretty well guess the north by the sun, and if we can't we can wait down there till after dark and get the boulder on in line with the star, and then shove a peg or something in the ground to mark it. By George!" he added excitedly, "it will be ripping if we really do find something!"

"I don't expect we shall," remarked Roger in a doubtful voice.

"Well, at any rate I vote we have a shot at it. Look here, we'll have an early breakfast and start off directly afterwards. The new tent's finished and there's no other job to be done, so it'll give us something to do."

"Right you are!" said Roger with a yawn. "I think I'm going to turn in. I hear Ah Sing snoring already."

They retired to their shelter, the paint on the new tent not yet being dry, and in less than half an hour they were both in a sound sleep from which the thoughts of all the hidden treasure in the world could not have awakened them.

CHAPTER XVII

The Search for the Treasure

THE next day turned out beautifully fine, and as Billy, Roger, and Ah Sing tramped down the hill after an early breakfast the sun was shining in a clear cloudless sky and there was hardly a breath of wind. They were off to see if they could discover the supposed hoard buried by the pirates, and carried, in addition to their rifles and ammunition, some sharpened bamboo stakes for marking out the ground, water bottles which they intended to fill at the stream, and for the midday meal some pieces of bread fruit and cold bird left over from supper the night before.

They intended to make a systematic search in the vicinity of the beacon on the western part of the island, and though both the boys were in the highest spirits and felt wildly excited at the prospect, Ah Sing, in spite of Billy's explanations, could not be persuaded to believe that any treasure was hidden at all. To him it seemed utterly impossible that anyone could be so simple as to bury gold and silver and then leave directions in a cave as to where it was to be found. He could not, or would not, realize that it had been concealed and the directions left in case the other pirates came back to look for it. But though he scoffed and laughed at the idea, he was not averse to assisting the boys in their search.

They arrived at the stream and filled their bottles, and then set about launching the dinghy. She was soon afloat,

and putting Ah Sing in the stern to steer, the boys took the oars and began to row seawards. The tide was half out, and though the rocks inside Point Wedderburn were not uncovered they took good care to give them a wide berth in case another squid should be lurking in the locality. Pulling with a steady stroke the little boat was soon abreast of Boulder Point. There was still a certain amount of swell, but not enough to make them uncomfortable, and rounding the sandy promontory without difficulty, the course was altered to the southward along the western side of the island, for, as before, they intended to land on Gosling Beach.

Once under the lee of the land the sea became flat calm and their progress was rapid, and within half an hour of starting out they had landed and secured the boat. Halt-
ing a few minutes in the shade of the palms, for even though it was still early the sun was overpoweringly hot, they struck inland and soon came to the cairn, "Black Arrow Beacon", as they had christened it.

"Now," said Billy, "the first thing to do is to get the line between the beacon and the top of the hill. Look here, I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll hold my rifle up over where the beacon was, and you walk off towards the hill and stick in one of the pegs when I tell you."

"Right-o!" Roger agreed; "how far d'you want me to go?"

"About thirty yards or so."

He walked off and stopped when he considered he had advanced the appointed distance. "Will this do?" he asked, turning round.

"A little farther."

"How's that?"

"That's about right. Now I want to get you in line with the hill; three paces to your right just about ought to do it. No, that's too much!" he shouted when Roger

had completed the manœuvre. "Come back to your left a bit. Woa! That'll do!"

"What do I do now?" Roger called back.

"Stick a peg in between your feet."

Roger bent down and drove in one of the sharpened bamboos. "Right you are! I've done that."

"Now go on again till I tell you to stop."

Roger moved forward till Billy halted him, when, as before, another peg was driven into the ground.

Stake after stake was placed in position in this manner until at last they had a distance of fully six hundred yards marked out on the sandy soil. Here and there bushes and patches of scrub intervened between the bamboos, but the line, by the time they had finished, was quite accurate as regards its direction.

"That'll do, Roger," shouted Billy. "It's quite long enough."

The other boy drove home the last peg and then rejoined his companion.

"Now we know," Billy observed, "that the stuff, if it is buried at all, is somewhere on this line, don't we?"

"We're only working on a pure guess," remarked Roger.

"Course we are, we haven't anything better to go on. At any rate, the next thing is to find the place on this line from which the boulder bears north." He pointed to where the great rock, with the full glare of the sun upon it, showed up almost pure white against its background of blue sky and sea.

"H'm!" murmured Roger. "The question is to get the blooming thing bearing north, and we haven't got a compass. Don't you think," he added, "we'd better put some more pegs in the other side of the beacon? You see," he went on to explain, "the stuff may be buried there. The rhyme said: 'Keep the beacon in the line

with the great upstanding cone', and it may be on either side of it, mayn't it?"

"On either side of what?"

"The beacon, of course."

"Oh yes! I see what you mean. I think we'd better do it."

In ten minutes, and by the same process as before, the line of stakes had been extended a couple of hundred yards to the westward.

"Now," said Roger, when this was finished. "Where's the north?"

"That's about east," Billy replied, pointing a little to the right of the hilltop. "That's about where the sun rises, at any rate."

"But it only rises about east," put in the other.

"It'll have to do for the present, at any rate," continued Billy. "I should guess," he went on, leaving the scattered stones of the cairn and walking about a hundred yards along the line of pegs towards the hill, "that the boulder bears about north from here, so this is where we'd better start digging. I expect the stuff will be pretty deep," he added. "Do you remember how the sand had silted up over the bottom layer of stones?"

"M, yes, but I don't expect they dug very far. They only took a day, according to the book, over the whole job, and the beacon must have taken a pretty long time to build. D'you remember how carefully all the stones had been fitted together?"

"Yes, and they all had to be carried from the beach, too. Well, what I suggest," Billy went on, "is that we start digging from here in both directions, right and left. There are two shovels, so we can work in spells. Ah Sing and I'll start."

"Right-o! I'll relieve you when you're fagged."

In the intense heat digging was wearisome work, though

The Boy Castaways

the sand was fairly soft, but with occasional spells the work went on without interruption, and by noon, when the sun was almost directly overhead, about thirty yards of the trench had been dug. It had been made about four feet deep and the same distance wide, but so far no trace of anything had been discovered.

"I don't fancy doing about six hundred yards of this," Roger grumbled, dropping his spade and mopping his streaming brow. "The heat's absolutely ghastly."

"Well, let's give it a rest for a bit," suggested Billy. "It's pretty nearly dinner-time, so I vote we take the grub back and eat it in the shade."

"Let's," agreed Roger, only too pleased to fall in with the suggestion. They left the spades and other things they had been using where they were and wended their way back to the palm plantation at the head of Gosling Beach. The shade, slight as it was, was very comforting after the glaring heat in the dreary waste of sand and scrub in which they had spent the morning, and after finishing their dinner they decided to stay where they were for a bit before resuming their labours. It was terribly hot, more oppressively so than ever on account of the entire absence of wind, and Ah Sing, as soon as he had finished his meal, settled himself comfortably in the shade and was soon fast asleep.

"Lazy brute," Billy laughed. "Just listen to his snoring."

"I feel jolly lazy myself," said Roger, glancing at the sleeping Chinaman. "What do you say to a bathe?" He eyed the tempting-looking water lapping in little waves against the dazzling yellow sand of the beach.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Billy, "it's much too soon after a meal. If you wait half an hour or so I'll come and have a dip with you."

"Aren't you going on with the digging, then?"

"No, I'm rather sick of it," Billy confessed. "It's a jolly sight harder work than I thought it would be. Let's wait here till to-night, and then we can get the Pole Star in line with the boulder. Then, if we stick a peg in, the place where the line joining the peg to the boulder crosses the line of stakes we put in this afternoon ought to be where the stuff is hidden, oughtn't it?"

"Yes, if the Pole Star is the star he was talking about. At any rate," Roger added, rather pleased at the idea of an idle afternoon, "your scheme's perfectly sound. Couldn't we stay here all night, though? It would be rather good sport to camp out."

"Too risky," Billy declared. "If the Chinamen did come back during the night we should be cut off from the fort, and that would never do."

"No, I didn't think of that; but we can come back here again and start in first thing in the morning."

"Yes," murmured Billy lazily, lying back on the sand and tilting his hat to keep the glare out of his eyes. "I'm jolly sleepy. I think a nap would be a ripping idea."

"Yes, so do I," agreed Roger, stretching himself out at full length.

Five minutes later all three of them were breathing peacefully, pleasantly tired after their exertions of the morning.

Billy had always been a light sleeper, and since he had been on the island he had acquired a habit of waking at the least unusual sound, while on this particular occasion, moreover, he was more in a doze than in a really deep slumber. How long he was in this sort of betwixt-and-between condition he could not judge; it might have been ten minutes or it might have been an hour, but all of a sudden he was brought back to his senses by an abrupt report from the direction of the stream.

"Great Scott, what's that?" he ejaculated, springing to his feet and snatching up his rifle.

"Bang!" came the sound of another shot, followed by the chattering of the frightened birds.

He glanced at his companions, but they were still sleeping, entirely oblivious to the noise, and seizing Roger by the shoulder he almost dragged him to his feet in his excitement.

"Roger!" he whispered in an agitated voice. "Roger, for heaven's sake wake up!"

"What's the matter?" asked Roger drowsily, opening his eyes. "Surely you're not going to bathe yet. I've only been asleep—— My sainted aunt!" he suddenly broke off, noticing Billy's alarmed expression. "What's happened?"

"Everything! The alarm guns have gone off!"

"Good Lord!" gasped the other, realizing the gravity of the situation. "Have the pirates come back?"

"They must have!" declared Billy. "And as the guns have fired they are probably halfway up the hill by this time!"

"What d'you think'll happen, then?"

"They'll get into the fort and find nobody there," Billy said in a grave voice.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Roger, beginning to feel very frightened. "That means we're cut off from the hill! What on earth are we to do?"

"Sh! Don't make a row!" his companion whispered. "Look here, we'll wake up Ah Sing, and then take our rifles and work our way towards Boulder Point. We can see what's going on from there, and if we take cover in the scrub they may not see us."

"But what about the boat? They're bound to spot her from the top of the hill."

"Can't help that; we've no time to worry about her. Come on, man, buck up!"

Roger seized his rifle and stuffed some cartridges into the magazine without further ado, while Billy went across to wake up the still-slumbering Chinaman.

"Ah Sing!" he exclaimed, shaking him by the arm.

"Wa b'long?" said the drowsy man, opening his eyes and yawning.

"Wake up!" said Billy. "The pirates have come back!"

"Hi yah!" ejaculated the other, jumping to his feet at once. "Which side have got?"

"Over there," said the boy, motioning towards the stream. "Come on, there's no time to lose!"

He waited till the others were ready, and then, after a hasty look at the top of the hill, upon which he could see no signs of anything unusual, ran out of the fringe of palms and across the open stretch of sand in rear. Followed by the others he crossed the bare space at full pelt, expecting every minute to be sighted and fired upon from the hill. But nothing happened, and panting after the run they reached the edge of the scrub in safety and flung themselves down under the friendly cover of a large bush.

"I can't see anyone on top of the hill," remarked Roger breathlessly, poking his head out round the corner.

"Perhaps the alarm guns have frightened them," Billy suggested. "It's jolly funny, though," he added, "that we haven't heard 'em yelling. Last time they kicked up an awful row."

"Well, what had we better do?" queried Roger anxiously.

"Work our way towards the stream," said his companion, "and keep under cover of the scrub as much as we can. Look out you keep your rifle ready, and for heaven's sake don't make a row!"

"But supposing they are by the stream?"

"The only thing to do then is to work our way back again and try to get up to Hill Fort from the south. We'll have to cross the swamp to do it, but if they have landed it's that or nothing."

With Billy leading, Roger coming next, and Ah Sing bringing up the rear, they gradually went forward. They crossed the open spaces at a run, and moved along on their hands and knees whenever the scrub gave them a chance of concealing themselves from possible observers on the hill. Though it was terribly trying work in the dry powdery sand—the intense heat and their own excitement making it ten times worse—they found themselves, after twenty minutes, getting fairly close to the western shore of Salvation Bay.

The scrub now got thinner, so they struck inland to have the palms in between them and the stream in case anyone should be there, and after wriggling for some distance until Billy judged he could obtain a clear view of the little bay, he halted and peered cautiously out from behind a friendly bush which effectually concealed him.

"Phew!" he whistled in surprise.

"What's up?" asked Roger anxiously.

"There's not a blooming thing there!" He had fully expected to see the junk anchored in the cove, and sampans hauled up on the beach, but there were no signs of either.

"Can you see anyone?" Roger demanded again, crawling up alongside his friend.

"Not a soul! Look for yourself!"

"Perhaps they've gone on up the hill."

"Where's the junk then?"

"The other side of the island, perhaps."

"No," said Billy, shaking his head. "They wouldn't have anchored there. There's still a bit of a swell running, and the weather side of the island would be too

dangerous. I don't believe——” He stopped abruptly without finishing what he had intended to say.

“You don't believe what?” Roger asked.

“That they've come at all. We should have seen something of them, or heard 'em yelling long before this. Don't you think so, Ah Sing?” he added, turning to the Chinaman.

“Pilate no come,” said the latter confidently. “He come, makee plenty bobbery, makee talk. I savvy!”

“That's all jolly well,” said Roger, very puzzled. “But who the dickens fired the alarm guns then? The blooming things couldn't have gone off by themselves!”

“I'm blowed if I know!” Billy replied, equally perplexed.

“I suppose you're quite certain they did go off?” said Roger.

“Absolutely!” declared the other. “The first one woke me up, and I heard the second just before I shook you.”

“Well, it baffles me. Someone must have fired 'em.”

“Let's go on a bit and look round,” suggested Billy. “I'm almost certain nobody landed. You heard what Ah Sing said?”

Roger nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I heard all right. I vote we go on, as you suggest. We must find out who fired the beastly things.”

Their weary progress was resumed, and creeping silently through the palms on their hands and knees they soon arrived on the banks of the stream. Nothing seemed to be amiss, but they all lay with their rifles ready for instant use. Nothing could be heard save the rustling of the foliage overhead, and Billy was just about to say something to the others when he suddenly heard a peculiar sound in the undergrowth beyond the hut on the other side of the stream.

"What's that?" whispered Roger anxiously, flicking back the safety-catch of his rifle.

"Sh! Don't talk!" Billy hissed. "Look out, though, there's something there!"

The rustling, sounding exactly as if someone was forcing a passage through the thick tangled undergrowth, continued, and then they heard another noise like light footsteps pattering over soft ground. Nearer and nearer they came, and with their hearts in their mouths the boys and Ah Sing levelled their weapons in the direction from which whatever was causing the noise would probably appear.

They waited for an appreciable time in dead silence while the rustling continued, but then the suspense became more than Roger could bear, and bringing his weapon to his shoulder he fired into the broad belt of thick growth about thirty yards to his front.

The sharp report was instantly followed by a regular bedlam. The air resounded with piercing squeals and a deafening chatter, and before any of them quite realized what had happened, a troop of small monkeys leapt out of the bushes and fled inland with shrill cries of alarm. There were fully a hundred of the little brown creatures, and half-leaping, half-running, pushing and jostling each other out of the way for all the world like a crowd of human beings, they sped inland as fast as their little legs would carry them. Several shinned up coconut palms in their terror, crying out with alarm and grimacing as they crawled out of sight in the spreading foliage, but by far the greater number fled through the bushes towards the valley, the noise of their flight being absolutely deafening. The birds, too, disturbed by Roger's shot, set up their usual clamour, and for some minutes the whole wood was filled with a babel of sound.

Billy rolled over on his back howling with laughter.

"Oh!" he gasped, when at length the din had subsided, and with tears of amusement streaming down his face. "Oh my sainted aunt!"

Ah Sing's mouth opened in a broad grin, and Roger was laughing so much that he could hardly speak.

"To think," he at length managed to splutter out, "to think that we've been stalking those little beasts for the last three-quarters of an hour! Oh, Lord! Hold my hand someone!" He went off into another paroxysm of mirth.

"I'm jolly glad we know who fired the alarm guns, though," put in Billy, breathless with mingled relief and amusement. "I suppose the little blighters came prowling round when we were out of the way, and pulled the strings. D'you remember we saw heaps of 'em in that peculiar tree with the copper thing on it?"

"Yes," said Roger, "'course I do. To think, though," he added, rather indignantly, "that we've been scared out of our lives by a lot of monkeys!"

"It is about the limit," gasped Billy, still giggling. "Now I suppose we'll have to go and load the alarm guns again."

Leaving the stream, they began to climb the hill on their way up to the fort, for Billy, even though he felt practically certain that the monkeys had fired the alarm guns, was conscious of a vague idea at the back of his mind that perhaps, after all, the pirates might have returned. On reaching the summit, however, he was reassured, for everything was as it should be, and there were no signs of a junk anywhere.

"I'm jolly glad they didn't come," he remarked in a relieved voice. "If they had got up here before us we'd have been up a gum tree, all right."

"I should jolly well think so!" Roger agreed. "Why, we'd have been cut off from all our ammunition and food."

"A pretty serious lookout. I wonder if they are likely to come back, though?" queried the other.

"Shouldn't think so," answered Roger. "They lost a good many men last time. Besides," he went on to say, "there's not much they could come back for, is there?"

"No, I suppose there isn't, really; unless, of course they come back with the idea of wiping us out. They're revengeful beasts. What d'you think about it, Ah Sing?"

"Wa b'long?" asked the Chinaman, who had not been listening to the conversation.

"D'you think the pirates'll come back again?" Billy asked him again.

"My no savvy," Ah Sing said, shrugging his shoulders. "My no savvy. Plaps no come; plaps bime' by come, my no savvy. Capten makee dead," he continued, pointing down the hill towards the boulder where the leader of the bloodthirsty gang had met his fate. "Ulla piecee plaps come back."

"Well, I jolly well hope they don't!" observed Roger feelingly. "It was quite bad enough last time."

"Yes," agreed Billy, "it was a beastly show. Let's hope they don't. What d'you think we'd better do now?"

"No use going on digging, is it?" asked Roger.

"No, I don't think it is. Suppose we wait till sunset, and then go down and get the Pole Star over the boulder. Oh, I forgot, though, I shall have to reload the alarm guns, but I don't think there's much else to be done, is there?"

"Don't think so; but it won't be sunset for ages," Roger replied, glancing at the sun. "I shouldn't think it's much more than two o'clock now."

"No, but when I've finished doing the guns, I think I'll go and get some more bread fruit, and you might take the gun and get a bird or two. It'll help to pass the time, and after that I think we might have a bathe."

"Right-o! I vote we stick to the stream, though. I don't fancy swimming in the bay after that octopus show the other day. Bah! Supposing another of the brutes got hold of one of us?"

Billy shuddered at the thought. "It'll be all right in the stream," he remarked; "he couldn't get at us there."

"No, I suppose that'll be safe enough," said Roger. "By the way, though," he added, "have we got a yard measure?"

"No; but whatever do you want one for?"

"I thought it would be rather a good idea to measure the side of the hill towards Point Wedderburn. We could shove pegs in every hundred yards, and then, if we ever are attacked, we shall know the exact range."

"Roger, my son, that's quite a good idea of yours. You're becoming quite a genius in your way."

The boy flushed with pleasure, for Billy did not often praise him to his face.

"Yes," he said, "but it's no earthly good if we've nothing to measure the ground with."

"Fathead!" laughed Billy. "There's the leadline, and that's marked in fathoms."

"George! So it is; I clean forgot it. Let's see, how do the marks go?"

"Five and fifteen, white bunting; seven and seventeen, red; thirteen, blue; two, two strips of leather; three, three strips of leather; ten, piece of leather with a hole in it; twenty, two knots!" rattled off Billy, for, thanks to the mate of the *Saracen's* teaching, he knew the marks on the leadline as well as any seaman. "You see," he resumed, "Mr. Hardcastle was in the R.N.R., and always had the leadlines marked navy fashion."

"What's the R.N.R.?" queried Roger.

"Royal Naval Reserve."

"You're rather a marvel, Bill," observed the other boy

admiringly, and rather envious of his friend's knowledge. "I don't know how you've managed to pick up all these things. I can't remember anything."

"Never mind, my son," rejoined Billy with mock condescension. "By the time I've finished being your sea daddy you'll be quite a decent seaman. You're getting on quite well, and that idea of marking out the ground is jolly cute. You'd better do it in hundreds of yards. Stick a peg in at each hundred, and look out they're long enough for us to see 'em."

"Let's see," said Roger, "a fathom's six feet, so a hundred yards'll be——" He hesitated, for arithmetic had never been his strong point.

"One fathom's two yards," put in Billy, "and as the whole leadline's twenty-five fathoms, it's fifty yards. You'll have to stretch it out twice for each hundred. See?"

Roger nodded. "Right you are!" he said. "I'll get along with it while you're loading the alarm guns."

Ah Sing was sent off to procure some bread fruit, and while Billy went down the hill to reload the alarm guns, Roger set to work to measure out the side of the hill. It did not take him very long, and step by step he made his way down the slope until he had a row of bamboo, topped with white canvas flags, stretching from the fort to the edge of the wood where the alarm guns were, and a hundred yards apart. He found the wood was about eight hundred yards from the summit, and after driving in the last bamboo, he coiled up the leadline and walked over to where Billy was at work.

"Well," he asked, "how goes it?"

"Just finished," Billy said. "I had to unleash the blooming things to reload 'em. There," he added, knotting the twine securing the pistol to its tree, "I think that's all ship-shape. How've you been getting on?"

"I've stuck in a flag every hundred yards," said Roger,

waving his hand towards his line of bamboos, "so now we'll be able to know the exact range."

"That's a good job," returned the other. "Our shooting wasn't up to much last time. Come on, let's go and see how Ah Sing's getting on."

They found the Chinaman had already gathered sufficient bread fruit for their purpose, and calling him down from the tree, where he was sitting on a branch smoking his long pipe, into the bowl of which he had stuffed a few shreds of his now rapidly vanishing stock of tobacco, helped him to carry what fruit he had obtained up to Hill Fort.

Half an hour later, when the afternoon was well advanced, all three of them were splashing about in the cool waters of the stream, and their bathe finished they once more climbed the hill.

"Well," Billy remarked, when they reached the fort, "I vote we have something to eat now. We can have tea and supper rolled into one, and then at sunset we'll go across to the beacon and get the Pole Star in line with that rotten old boulder. Then, when we've marked the place, we'll launch the dinghy and come back by moonlight."

"Right-o!" agreed Roger. "I was just going to suggest having grub. I've got an aching what-d'you-call-it just here." He placed his hand on the spot.

Billy laughed. "Trust you for that!" he observed with a grin.

"All right!" retorted Roger. "You know jolly well you can't talk. You're just as fond of your grub as I am."

"Well, I will admit I'm hungry now, at any rate," admitted Billy. "But if you want any supper you'd better light the blooming fire. I'll ferret round and see what there is to eat."

"Roger!" he called a minute or two later, coming back

from the tent to where the other boy was endeavouring to make the fire burn up.

"Hallo, what's up now?" Roger asked, looking up breathless and very red in the face.

"What d'you say to having a go at this?" He produced a tin.

"What is it?"

"Plum pudding!" said Billy. "Don't you think we might celebrate the finding of the treasure by wolfing it?"

"But we haven't found it," Roger protested.

"All right, then! we won't," answered Billy, pretending to go back to the tent. "I'll put—"

"Half a mo', though," interrupted the other. "Suppose we have it to eat to the success of the treasure hunt?"

"Pretty ingenious!" laughed Billy. "You're just about the blooming limit, so far as food's concerned. Here goes, then!" he cried, producing a tin-opener and prising off the lid.

The meal consisted of fried fish and the plum pudding—slightly less glutinous than upon the previous occasion they had tried it—washed down with cold water.

"By Jove!" Roger remarked, heaving a sigh of satisfaction at the conclusion of the meal, "that's been a top-hole feed! I wish I had some stone ginger, or sherbet, or something to wash it down with. Water and plum duff don't seem to go well, somehow."

"I think it's a jolly good thing we haven't any," Billy said with a snigger. "If I drank any fizzy stuff now I'd go off like a bomb. Come on, though; if you've finished filling yourself it's high time we started off."

"All right! I'm ready," answered Roger, rising lazily to his feet. "By gum, it's not often we have grub like that!"

"My tink bime' by Massa Loger b'long velly sick," observed Ah Sing with a grin. "Plum pudding, orl same

Klissmass, my savvy!" He rolled his eyes comically, and went through the motions of being very ill.

"Sick! What d'you mean?" exclaimed Roger, rather indignantly.

"No sick, velly sick!" repeated the Chinaman, laughing. "I savvy orl lite."

"Come on, you two!" Billy interrupted, laughing at Ah Sing's witticisms. "Don't stand there wasting time! Come on! Quick march!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Treasure Trove

STILL thinking of some suitable retort to hurl at the Chinaman's head, Roger shouldered his rifle and tramped off down the hill with his companions. The sun was setting as they made the descent, and passing over the stream and along the beach, they headed inland across the scrub-covered country on their way towards the beacon.

"I don't quite know," Roger remarked when they were halfway there, "why we ever thought it was necessary to use the boat to get to this part of the island. This way's far easier, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," agreed Billy, "but I thought at first the scrub here was too thick to get through. But it's quite all right so long as we walk round the patches instead of trying to break through them."

"Well," said Roger, "we might just as well leave the dinghy on the beach for the night and walk back to Hill Fort. You see," he went on to explain, "if we do find anything when we dig it'll be far easier to take it round in the boat, particularly if it's heavy; won't it?"

"Yes, it'll save us two trips that way," said Billy. "Rather a good idea, I think. The boat ought to be perfectly all right so long as we haul her up on the sand; we don't want her to drift away."

"Oh, she won't do that if we tie her up properly."

They reached the beacon when the darkening blue of

the sky showed that twilight was approaching, but Billy had rather misjudged the time, for as yet there were no signs of the stars. They went on to Gosling Beach, therefore, and spent the interval in hauling the boat up and making her all snug for the night, and then walked back to where they had been digging earlier in the day.

A quarter of an hour later the sunset colours had faded from the sky, and one by one the stars began to twinkle in the velvety blue pall overhead.

"Now then, Bill!" Roger exclaimed. "You ought to be able to see your blooming old Pole Star by this time. It's getting dark, and we shan't be able to see the boulder much longer."

Billy rose to his feet and looked towards the northern horizon, and presently saw the familiar outline of the Great Bear. He found the two pointers, and joining them with an imaginary line, followed it up until he came to the star he was looking for.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed, moving off to the left to get it immediately in line with the boulder, which was now barely visible against its dark background. "Have you got one of these stakes handy, Roger?"

"Yes, here's one."

Billy stopped dead. "Then stick it in here between my feet," he ordered. "This is the place!"

Roger did so.

"There," he said when this had been done. "This bamboo in line with the boulder gives us the north-and-south line, and where it cuts the one we laid off this morning between the beacon and Hill Fort is the place where the stuff is buried, or ought to be."

"Shall we start digging now?" asked Roger eagerly. "This place is a good way off where we made that trench this morning."

"No, let's go back to the Fort," Billy suggested.

"I'm a bit fagged, and besides, what little light there is will be gone very soon; and we haven't brought the lantern."

"All right then! but I vote we make an early start to-morrow."

"Yes, I think we'd better, and then we can put in some good work before it gets too hot. Come on," he added, "let's be getting back. We'll have an awful time getting through that scrub in the dark if we don't buck up."

"Shall we leave the spades and other things behind?"

"Yes, it's no use carting 'em all up the hill if we're to use 'em again first thing in the morning. Come on!"

They set out on the return journey, and though there was still enough light in the sky to enable them to find their way through the scrub and along the beach without difficulty, darkness had fallen by the time they began their ascent of the hill, and they found the boulders a serious obstacle to rapid progress.

"Blow!" muttered Billy, as for the tenth time he came into violent collision with a large mass of rock, "you can't see the things more than a foot off!"

"I've been barking my shins right and left, too," Roger grumbled. "Ah Sing seems to be getting on all right, though. I wonder—"

The rest of his sentence was left unsaid, for just at that moment he was violently clutched from the rear. Ah Sing had tripped over a small rock, and in trying to save himself had grasped Roger's shirt, and before either of them quite realized what had happened, they had both fallen to the ground in a mixed-up heap of arms and legs.

"Hi! Steady on, Ah Sing!" ejaculated the boy indignantly, sitting up.

"B'long solly, massa; no can see!" growled the Chinaman, rubbing a bruised shin, with a muttered flow of what were evidently native swear words. "B'long velly dark!"

"All the same you needn't pull a chap down with you," protested Roger, half laughing in spite of his annoyance. "It's as much as I can do to keep up myself, let alone if another chap suddenly claps hold of me from behind." He stood up and began to grope for his fallen rifle.

"Come on, you two," came Billy's laughing voice from higher up. "We've not much farther to go, but if you chaps stay there calling each other names we'll never get home at all."

Roger and Ah Sing found their rifles and resumed their weary progress, and soon afterwards they were all three safe in Hill Fort.

By seven o'clock the next morning they were once more at the beacon. The two boys were eagerly discussing the plan of operations; but Ah Sing looked on with indifference.

He could not conceive why such a lot of trouble should be taken for the sake of some supposed treasure, particularly as he himself was quite certain that it did not exist. To him, people who went climbing up hills at night, barking their shins against boulders and tumbling into each other, were nothing more nor less than mad. Folk who stuck a lot of silly-looking pegs in the ground, and then walked about until they got stars in line with quite ordinary-looking boulders must also be demented. Why on earth did they do it? It all seemed so utterly foolish.

But of course all Englishmen were more or less insane, he remembered. They all insisted on having at least one bath every day of their lives, and if that was not proof positive, nothing was.

Ah Sing invariably believed what his eyes saw and what his ears heard. He was not such a fool as to imagine that someone would bury treasure on an island and then write in a book whereabouts it was to be found, not he. But, after all, he was forced to admit to himself there was

a method in the madness of all Englishmen which he rather admired. For one thing, the largest war junks he had ever seen belonged to them; the "two piecee bamboo, four piecee puff puff, inside walkee no can see",¹ war junks which used to lie in Hong-Kong harbour.

But even these war junks, monstrous and magnificent as they were, were obviously built by lunatics. They must be; they had no eyes, so how on earth could they see where they were going?²

They were inhabited, too, by barbarians; strange-looking, loud-voiced, red-faced beings, clad in absurd clothes and loose-bottomed white trousers, which they neglected to tie round their ankles. They wore peculiar straw hats; walked with a rolling gait; while many of them had a strange hairy growth on their faces. They used, he remembered, to spend small fortunes in the native tattooers' shops, having highly-coloured dragons, beasts, and insects embroidered upon their bodies. Their arms and legs were very hairy, probably to keep them warm in their own country; assuredly they were mad barbarians, or else first cousins to the white-faced monkeys which came from Singapore. But these two small barbarians were madder than the whole lot of them put together. They were brave, he knew, for had they not killed the redoubtable Chong Tung, the captain of the pirates, who himself had sworn that they should die the death of a thousand cuts? and had they not saved him, Ah Sing, from the grip of the awful sea monster into whose clutches he had fallen? Yes, they had, and he was profoundly grateful to them, but they were mad all the same.

Treasure indeed! The very idea of it was absurd!

¹ Two-masted four-funnelled cruisers. "Inside walkee no can see" refers to ships driven by screw propellers, as opposed to those with paddle wheels, which can be seen revolving outside the ship.

² All Chinese junks and many sampans have eyes painted on their bows. "If no got eye, how can see?" says John Chinaman.

But still he could not help looking on with interest as the boys got on with their work, they were so very methodical in what they did.

First, Billy marked the spot where the north-and-south line cut the one they had pegged out between the beacon and the summit of the hill. Then Roger and he took their spades and started to dig in a circle round the point of intersection of the two lines. They worked with feverish haste, and as if all the black-faced demons of the unseen world were prodding them with barbed tridents to keep them hard at it.

Shades of his ancestors! Were there ever such fools! They must be stark staring mad! There was no other word for it.

But Ah Sing was not allowed to be idle for very long, for presently Billy began to grow tired, and throwing down his spade came across to where he sat. "Come on, Ah Sing," said he, "it's about time you had a go at digging!"

Ah Sing stood up meekly and took off his loose coat. He must humour these strange creatures, he thought to himself, as he took the shovel and set to work without raising any protest.

The morning wore on, and by the time they had been at work for two hours they had dug a circular pit about four feet deep and twenty feet across. They worked in spells, refreshing themselves at intervals with copious draughts of water, but so far nothing had been found. The sun was grilling, and their original ardour had somewhat diminished, but the work still went on slowly.

"For heaven's sake give us a drink out of your bottle!" ejaculated Roger, throwing down his spade and wiping the perspiration out of his eyes. "I've drunk all mine!"

"So have I," said Billy, stopping work a minute to uncork and invert the bottle, which was quite empty.

"Blow! I wonder if Ah Sing's got any to spare?"
But the Chinaman, too, had drunk all his.

"Ah Sing," said Billy, "you might take all the bottles along to the stream and fill 'em again. You don't mind, do you?"

"Orl lite, can do," the Chinaman replied, rather pleased at the opportunity of escaping a certain amount of digging.
"My can catch orl lite!"

He took the bottles and walked off, neither Billy nor Roger noticing that he had left his rifle behind him.

Billy went on with his digging at the brink of the shallow pit they had excavated, driving his spade in at the edge to loosen the sand for his companion to shovel out. For about a foot below the ground level it was powdery and dry, and he therefore had little difficulty, but deeper down it was moist and heavy, and it was here that the work was back-breaking.

For five minutes they laboured away in silence, panting hard with their exertions, when, quite suddenly, the edge of Billy's spade grated against something solid about a foot below the level on which he was at work.

"There's something here!" he exclaimed excitedly, wrenching at his spade to get it free. It suddenly came out with a jerk which sent him flying on his back, but in an instant he was up again and digging hard.

Roger joined him, and before long they had the object uncovered.

It was nothing but quite an ordinary-looking ash spar, about six feet in length. It looked, from its slightly tapering shape, as if it had once been the loom of an oar, and in spite of the dampness of the ground in which it had been buried, it had barely rotted at all.

"Bah! It's only a rotten old piece of wood!" Roger exclaimed disgustedly. "I thought we'd got hold of something really decent!"

"But how on earth did it get here?" asked Billy, rather puzzled. "It must have been buried."

"Why?"

"Because if it had originally been on the ground it would have taken ages before it got covered with over three feet of sand. Therefore," he explained, "it was buried here."

"How long ago, then?"

Billy scratched his head. "I should imagine," he said, "that it was put here about the same time the beacon was built."

"In other words, that it's got something to do with the *Black Arrow* people?" put in Roger breathlessly.

Billy nodded. "Look here!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I've an idea. The book said the treasure was buried, or disposed of, I believe they called it, after much difficulty, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, if they had much difficulty the chest, or whatever it was, was probably heavy?"

"Well?"

"Supposing they found they had an awful job lifting it in the ordinary way, and suppose they put a rope round the chest, put this through it," he kicked the spar, "and then carried it along with the ends on their shoulders?"

Roger thought for a minute. "But why should they bury the spar?" he demanded.

"That I don't know; but what d'you think of the idea?"

"Seems quite possible, but if you're right the treasure ought to be quite close, oughtn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, let's get on, then!"

They recommenced their labours, and at the third stroke of his shovel Roger let rip a sudden exclamation.

"Have you got something?" asked Billy.

"There's something here!" said his companion, almost too excited to speak. "D'you hear it?" He moved his spade to and fro, and they could both hear a peculiar hollow grating sound as its edge ground over something below the surface.

Without stopping to talk they began to shovel away the sand for all they were worth. In a minute they had uncovered something which looked like the corner of a box, and soon afterwards the whole thing was laid bare.

"My sainted aunt!" howled Billy, frantic with excitement.

It was the lid of a chest about four feet long by three wide. It was made of some dark wood looking like oak, but now so blackened with damp and age as to be unrecognizable. Heavy metal bands crossed the top in both directions, while mildewed fragments of what looked like leather still adhered round their edges. The corners were covered with heavy brass, while in the very centre of the lid was a small lozenge-shaped oval of the same metal. Billy bent down to examine it more closely, for his sharp eyes had detected traces of lettering upon it. Nor was he mistaken, for after rubbing away the sand he saw the oval was engraved with a crown over the letters A. F. D. Below these again came the word "Lisboa", and the date, "1799". These were probably the maker's initials and the date and place of manufacture, Lisbon.

Seizing their spades they began to dig away the sand from round about it. In less than five minutes the whole thing was uncovered, and, like the top, the sides, back, and front were criss-crossed with the same heavy brass strips. At either end were huge ornamental handles of the same metal, while the lid was fastened by three enormous padlocks passing through iron staples, and now half-eaten away with rust.

Without a doubt the chest contained, or had contained, something very valuable, for the massive brass fittings and the three locks seemed most unusual for an article of its size.

Seizing the handles they endeavoured to move it, but strain as they would they could not budge it an inch. Billy wrenched at one of the padlocks with his fingers, trying to break through the half-rusted staple, but he could not do it. For a moment he was nonplussed; but then suddenly remembered the axe they had been using the day before, and darting off soon returned with the weapon in his hand.

“Stand clear!” he said to Roger, who was still fumbling at the locks. The boy sprang aside; the hatchet descended with a crash, and the sharp blade bit clean through the rusty iron, severing the padlock at one blow. Again and again it fell, until at last all the fastenings had been chopped off, and nothing remained but to open the lid.

The axe was hopelessly ruined, for its once keen edge was nicked like the blade of a saw; but too excited to notice it, Billy cast it aside and attempted to open the lid. But the thing was stubborn and would not move.

“Get your spade, Roger,” he then commanded, “and shove the end of it under the other end of the lid like this!” He inserted the blade of his shovel in the crack under the lid, Roger doing the same the other end.

“Now then! One, two, three—heave!”

They levered with all their might, and with a protesting squeak from the long-disused hinges the lid opened about an inch. They put their shovels farther in and levered again, and step by step managed to force the lid up until it was three-quarters of the way open.

“That’ll do,” said Billy, trembling with agitation.

The chest was full to the brim, but on top of everything else was a large piece of silk, rotten and discoloured with

damp. They tore at it with their fingers, and it came away in long streamers. Next came a covering of thick leather, black, stiff, and cracked with age, and removing this without difficulty they peered inside.

They both stared at the contents with speechless astonishment, their eyes bulging out of their heads.

The interior was crammed with valuables.

Heavy candlesticks of richly-chased yellow metal which must be gold, drinking goblets of gold and silver, gold crosses set with sparkling red and green jewels, two or three sword and dagger hilts encrusted with gems which flashed a thousand colours in the sun, some embossed silver platters, very badly tarnished, finger rings innumerable, shoe buckles sparkling with diamonds, some silver forks and spoons, and a hundred and one other costly articles were jumbled together in chaotic confusion just as they had been thrown in.

Roger reached out and lifted up one of a number of bulging leather bags in the far corner. It burst, and a cascade of golden coins descended into the bottom of the chest with a tinkle. He stared, gasping with amazement. Billy took one of the other bags and fumbled with the rotting string tying its mouth. The cord came away, and plunging his hand inside he felt some small objects, very hard and cold. He clutched a handful and withdrew his fingers, and opening it gave a start of astonishment. His palm was covered with jewels, sparkling and glittering in the strong sunlight. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and many other stones whose names he did not know blazed white, purple, crimson, yellow, blue, and green in the light they had not seen for nearly a hundred years.

He stared at them in breathless consternation, too over-powered to think, for the contents of the small chest must have been worth a king's ransom.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" he ejaculated breathlessly, sitting down on the edge of the box to collect his scattered wits. "Great Cæsar's ghost! I wonder how much this little lot's worth?"

"Thousands and thousands!" cried Roger, picking up a jewelled gold crucifix and examining it attentively. "D'you think they're all real though?"

"Must be," Billy answered. "The pirates wouldn't have been such fools as to have buried a lot of imitation stuff. They must have been collecting it for years. Great Scott, though, what on earth are we to do with it? We can't possibly lift the chest."

"We can cart the things away a bit at a time if Ah Sing helps us. By gum, we shall be rich for life!"

"By the way," remarked Billy anxiously, "where is Ah Sing? He's been away a jolly long time!"

"Perhaps he's gone up the hill," Roger suggested.

"What on earth did he want to do that for?" said Billy, rather annoyed. "I only wanted him to go to the stream and fill the bottles!"

"I noticed he was a bit fed up with the digging, and perhaps he thought the longer he stayed away the less he'd have to do when he came back. I think he's rather sick with us for wanting to look for the treasure at all, as a matter of fact."

"He'll be jolly well sold when he does come back then," put in Billy with a pleased laugh. "He never would believe there was anything worth looking for, but now —" He finished his sentence by waving his hand towards the treasure chest. "By Jove, though," he went on to say, "d'you realize what this little lot means to us?"

"No, I haven't quite yet; it's all been so jolly sudden. How much d'you think the stuff's worth?"

"A pretty good lot. Those bags are evidently chock-a-block with gold coins and stones. Goodness only knows

how many thousands of pounds worth. At any rate, I'm quite certain of one thing!" announced Billy with decision.

"And what's that?"

"That I'm jolly well not going to sea as a cabin-boy any longer. No!" he shouted, seizing Roger by the shoulders and dancing him round and round. "And you'll be able to buy a motor car with your share. I think I shall have an aeroplane or two to start with, and then when I get sick of being ashore I'll buy a yacht of my own!"

"When—you've—quite—fin—finished dancing—the—bunny hug with me," gasped Roger breathlessly, "I—I've got something to say!"

"Well, what is it, my most wonderful Roger?" asked Billy, throwing his arms round him and hugging him as hard as he could. "Let the words of wisdom fall from my beautiful Roger's fairy lips!"

"Oh, chuck it, Bill!" exclaimed the other boy half-laughing, and vainly endeavouring to free himself. "I'm quite serious!"

"Spit it out, MacDuff!" said Billy, releasing him so suddenly that he fell on the ground in a heap.

"I wish you wouldn't be so beastly boisterous!" came a growl from the figure on the sand.

"Can't help it; I'm so beastly happy! What is it you were going to say, though?"

"I was about to remark," answered Roger in a dignified voice, for he did not like being twirled round and round like a teetotum and then being dumped on the ground like a sack of potatoes, "I was about to remark, William Martin, that it's no use your saying you're going to buy aeroplanes and motors and things. We aren't off this blooming island yet!" he concluded with a deep sigh.

"No, I quite forgot that," said the other quietly, feeling as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him. "That is rather an— Great Scott! What's that!" he

suddenly broke off, for the sound of a shot had come from the direction of the stream.

“The alarm guns again,” said Roger.

“No,” replied Billy, shaking his head; “it was a rifle. The row it made was quite sharp.”

“Well, Ah Sing’s fired at a bird perhaps.”

“He may have,” observed Billy; “but why—— Good heavens!” he suddenly exclaimed, his face blanching with alarm. “It can’t have been Ah Sing, he hasn’t taken his rifle!”

It was only too true; there were three rifles on the ground.

CHAPTER XIX

The Chinese Return

FOR some seconds they looked at each other in dead silence, for they both understood what the sudden report meant.

"D'you think they've come back?" whispered Roger at length, with a horrible sinking sensation at his heart.

"There's no doubt about it!" answered Billy, his white face betraying his nervousness. "Look!" He pointed towards the stream, and there, showing over the trees between them and the bay was the top of a brown sail. It could only be one thing—the junk.

"She must have been there all the time we were playing the fool," remarked Roger in a low voice.

"We must get our rifles and then lie down," whispered Billy. "Perhaps they haven't landed yet."

"But where's Ah Sing? He ought to have been back ages ago! D'you think he's been captured?"

"Goodness only knows!" replied Billy gravely. "If he has, they'll have killed him!" He shuddered at the idea.

"Well, what's the plan of campaign?" asked Roger, feeling slightly more cheerful now that he had his rifle in his hand.

"Directly Ah Sing turns up we must make a dash for the boat. If he's being chased I'll stay behind close to the palms by Gosling Beach and fire on them while you two launch the boat."



C 660

THE TREASURE CHEST

Page 255

"And what then?"

"When she's afloat you must open fire to give me a chance to join you."

"It'll be an awful risk," Roger pointed out.

"It's that or nothing," answered Billy; "we must do something, and we can't leave Ah Sing behind, unless, of course, he's been killed."

"Are we to wait till he comes here, then?"

"Yes, that's the only thing we can do. When he does come we must bolt for the dinghy, and when you two have launched her I'll come and join you. Then we must pull to the southward for all we're worth and try to get up to Hill Fort before they do."

"But supposing they're already there?"

"They aren't yet," said Billy, glancing at the summit of the hill. "Oh, I wish he'd come back! We can't leave him behind!"

Everything seemed unnaturally still and silent, and in their suspense they could almost hear the throbbing of their own hearts. For ten minutes or so they lay with their eyes glued to the wood from which Ah Sing must emerge—if he ever did come. Then quite suddenly something happened. A chorus of fiendish yells broke out from the neighbourhood of the stream; there was a rattle of musketry, and a few seconds later a blue-clad figure came running through the palms in their direction. He was fully half a mile distant, but he was running for his life, with his head down and his arms working, and about ten yards behind him sped another man flourishing a sword, for the boys could see the sunlight glinting on the bright blade.

"It's Ah Sing!" ejaculated Billy aghast, referring to the leader.

It was, and he was evidently in dire peril of his life.

Close behind the man with the sword came ten or a

dozen more carrying rifles, and as they reached the open country they opened out in a semicircle the better to head off their quarry. Every now and then one would drop on the knee and fire a shot at the flying figure ahead, but though the bullets drove up spurts of dust all round his feet, he still sped on untouched.

Ah Sing was now running through the scrub, twisting and turning in his mad flight to avoid the thicker patches, and though the same scrub was impeding the riflemen, the man with the sword was following in his proposed victim's footsteps and was obviously gaining fast.

"Come on," shouted Billy, snatching up the third rifle besides his own. "Come on. We must try to save him."

Now that the affair had actually begun the boys' original nervousness had vanished, and jumping to their feet they dashed off to the rescue. Before they had gone a hundred yards Ah Sing saw them coming and swerved to meet them. It was the very worst thing he could have done, for it placed him between the pursuer and the boys, with the consequence that neither of them could use their rifles on his assailant without running a grave risk of hitting him.

Billy tried to shout to tell him to make for the dinghy on the beach, and that he and Roger would endeavour to head off his pursuer; but he had run over two hundred yards at top speed and his throat was parched, and nothing but a feeble croak came when he tried to raise his voice. Ah Sing was getting more and more spent, and his feet moved slower and slower, while all the time his terrible adversary was drawing nearer. Every second the boys expected to see the glittering blade descend on their defenceless friend's head, but on and on he struggled until they could see his terror-stricken face and his awful look of agony as he glanced over his shoulder at the man behind.

The affair had now developed into a race. If Billy and Roger could reach him before the swordsman overtook him there was a chance he might be saved, but if not his fate seemed certain.

But the rescuers were soon beset by another danger, for on sighting them the other party of Chinese had abandoned the chase and were now collected in a group, yelling horribly. Presently, seeing they could bring their rifles to bear without risking the life of their own swordsman, they opened a heavy fire.

"Pop—pop pop—pop pop pop," went their rifles. The boys heard the bullets humming through the air like angry bees, they saw the sand being ploughed up in spurts all round them, but their blood was up. They found, as is always the case, that the anticipation of the fight was far worse than the fight itself; they felt themselves possessed with the glorious excitement of the thing, the savage fighting instincts of a long line of British ancestors came to their assistance, and ignoring the new peril they sped on with the sole idea of saving their own friend. They never thought of the risk they were running.

Billy felt the extra rifle he was carrying a terrible drag, but he did not dare drop it for fear it should fall into the hands of the enemy, and hardly heeding where he was going, ran forward for all he was worth. His heart seemed to be beating like a sledge hammer; the perspiration streamed down his face, and his breath came in choking gasps, but he felt he must save Ah Sing, even if it cost him his life.

The two parties, Billy and Roger on one side, and Ah Sing and his pursuer on the other, closed rapidly.

Fifty yards—thirty yards—twenty-five yards. Still the horrible glistening blade did not fall.

Billy stopped dead, and dropping one rifle on the ground, fell to his knee and brought the other to his shoulder

waiting for an opportunity to fire. Roger followed his example.

Seeing them stop, the Chinese near the wood redoubled their fire until the bullets flicked round the two motionless figures like raindrops in a thunderstorm. Roger felt his hat suddenly whisked off his head and a smarting pain as if a red-hot iron had been drawn across his scalp. He actually gave a short laugh of annoyance, thinking what a nuisance it was that his hat should be lost. Neither of them paid the least attention to the shower of nickel and lead, they were far too excited and intent on what was taking place in front.

Ah Sing ran on, his breath coming in choking gasps, and expecting every instant to feel the keen edge of the sword biting into his shoulder blades. Suddenly the swordsman made a frantic slash at his victim, but missed. He gave a snarl of rage and poised the weapon for another stroke——

Billy saw it coming, and suddenly found his voice. "Run to your right, Ah Sing!" he screamed in a voice which he hardly recognized as his own.

Ah Sing heard him and understood, for, making a supreme effort, he suddenly turned sharp off to the right as the sword blade fell. The movement undoubtedly saved him his life, for the weapon of his pursuer whistled within a couple of inches of his shoulder as he turned.

The impetus of the blow made the swordsman stagger; he nearly recovered himself, but the root of a bush finished the business, and the boys suddenly saw him fall headlong, his weapon, leaving his grasp, describing a parabola in the air and then falling on the sand close to Ah Sing.

The latter, hearing the muttered shout of rage as the pirate tripped, turned and saw the fallen weapon at his very feet, and promptly possessed himself of it. His adversary, meanwhile, was fumbling for the revolver round

his waist, but before he could find it Ah Sing was upon him. The blade flashed in the air and descended with sickening crunch. The pirate fell like a log, twitched convulsively, and then lay still on the sand with the blood flowing from a horrible wound in his head.

He was dead.

Ah Sing, panting horribly, gazed at his handiwork with blank amazement on his face. He could hardly realize he had escaped from what had seemed an inevitable death, and seeing the boys coming towards him pointed to the corpse with a shrill cackle of unnatural laughter.

"Come on!" shouted Billy, pushing the extra rifle into his hands. "Come on. We must get to the dinghy as fast as we can!"

There was need for haste, for the pirates, having been reinforced, were now advancing through the scrub, shouting and firing as they came.

Billy's words brought the understanding back to the Chinaman's mind, for, with a final look at his fallen enemy as if to make certain that he was really dead, he set off for the beach with the bloodstained sword still clutched in his right hand and his rifle in the left. They ran at a gentle jog trot, all Ah Sing was capable of after his recent ordeal, and the pace seemed desperately slow. But the enemy behind were having great difficulty in the scrub, and though their yells were enough to strike terror into the stoutest heart, they had ceased firing. The consequence was that the three fugitives reached Gosling Beach a good five hundred yards ahead of their pursuers.

In accordance with the prearranged programme Billy remained behind in the fringe of palms while the other two went on down the beach to launch the boat. He sheltered himself behind a thick-stemmed palm and waited, for as yet the advancing pirates were still hidden from view by a rise in the ground. Glancing over his shoulder he saw

that Roger and Ah Sing were making good progress, and he was congratulating himself that the tide was high and that they would not have very far to push the dinghy, when he saw the first blue-clad figure topping the rise about four hundred yards to his front.

He watched attentively, and presently, on reaching the top of the slope the man stopped dead, looking round with his hand shielding his eyes to see what had become of his quarry. He then turned round and said something to one of his companions, and a second man came and stood beside him.

Billy brought the rifle to his shoulder, got the sights well in line, and pressed the trigger. The range was rather long for his by no means expert marksmanship, and his hand was trembling after his long run, but luck favoured him, for the right-hand figure of the two collapsed in a heap.

More men then appeared and clustered round the fallen warrior, jabbering loudly. It was the stupidest thing they could have done, for the crowd of them offered a splendid target which could hardly be missed, and again the boy's rifle cracked. Another man spun round in the air and fell beside the first, while the others, thinking, doubtless, that discretion was the better part of valour, disappeared behind the ridge.

The dinghy meanwhile, thanks to the united efforts of Roger and Ah Sing, was close to the water's edge, but the enemy had evidently seen her through the trunks of the palms, for Billy could see the flashes of the hostile rifles all along the ridge. The bullets pinged through the foliage over his head and fell in the water a good two hundred yards to seaward of the boat, but luckily the marksmen could not see the splashes on account of the intervening palms, so their fire, though heavy, was quite futile.

"Silly fools," muttered Billy under his breath, as he

held his rifle ready for another shot. "Silly fools. They're simply wasting their ammunition."

But the Chinese showed no desire to advance. They had already seen two of their men knocked out by some invisible marksman, and for all they knew there might be several more waiting to receive them with a volley. They therefore preferred to take advantage of the slight cover afforded by the ridge, and from here they kept up terrific but perfectly useless fire. The reports of their rifles merged into one long-drawn-out rattle of sound, and the bullets pattered through the palm tops like hail, but beyond mutilating them, and filling the air with falling foliage and pieces of bark, they did absolutely no damage. Every now and then a head would appear for an instant over the ridge and then bob down again, and Billy, though he knew full well he had little chance of hitting so small a target, let drive occasionally to "keep 'em lively", as he afterwards described it. There was really something rather comical in the situation, for the Chinese, wellnigh frantic with rage at having had three of their men laid low, sought to wreak their revenge by firing off their rifles as fast as they could. So much the better, thought Billy, for their ammunition could not be unlimited.

Presently he heard a shout from behind. "What's up?" he shouted.

"She's afloat!" yelled Roger. "Come on!"

Billy fired one more round and then turned and ran down the beach, and wading out until the water was knee deep, scrambled on board. There was, as luck would have it, a slight northerly breeze which had sprung up during the morning, and as it was the very thing to help them along on their way south, they stepped the mast and hoisted the sail.

Now was coming the most risky part of the undertaking, for they had fully three and a half miles to go before being

able to land between Cape Martin and Saracen Cove, from where they hoped to be able to make their way up to Hill Fort up the southern slope. It was that or nothing, however, for the western half of the island was now swarming with Chinese, and it would have been absolute suicide for the three of them to endeavour to break their way through. The mangrove swamp and thick scrub at the south-western base of the hill, moreover, would prove a serious, if not impassable barrier, so the only thing to do was to try to sail round in the boat.

The dinghy was seen by the enemy as soon as she left Gosling Beach, but their fire had slackened considerably, probably owing to their having exhausted most of their ammunition. Even the shots which did come near her were remarkably ill aimed, for none pitched within twenty yards, so the fire was not returned. Presently several of the Chinese appeared on the beach and began to shoot at the boat barely four hundred yards away. One bullet went through the sail, so for quite a minute Billy, Roger, and Ah Sing plied their weapons as hard as they could. The result was satisfactory, for the pirates, seeing the sand being knocked up all round them, did not wait for more, but retreated inland as fast as their legs would carry them.

Five minutes later the hostile fire had completely died away. There was no doubt what had happened; the enemy, thanks to their senseless expenditure, had run out of ammunition, and though those in the boat could hear their wild yells of rage as they sailed off, the Chinese were powerless to stop them. Neither did they dare show themselves on the beach for fear of being fired upon, and up to the present the fortune of the day had distinctly been on the boys' side. They had incapacitated three of the pirates without suffering so much as a scratch. At any rate this was what Billy thought, for he passed a remark to that effect.

"I believe," said Roger solemnly, "I've been wounded."

"Where?" cried Billy, getting alarmed and looking for traces of blood on his companion.

"It's only a scratch," laughed the other, amused at his friend's anxiety. "You might just have a look at my nut, will you?" He bent down to let Billy examine his head.

"Um, there's a sort of cut along the top of your skull, but it's only just broken the skin. Does it hurt?"

"Can't feel it," said Roger. "It knocked seven bells out of my old hat, though. Went plump through it and knocked it off, and I couldn't stop to pick the blooming thing up. I say, though," he inquired anxiously, "do you think it'll leave a scar?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Blow! I was hoping it would!"

They both laughed.

Junk Point was soon rounded, and hauling aft the sheet Billy headed the boat to the south-east along the southern shore of the island.

"I say, Roger!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I can't see anyone in Hill Fort, can you?"

"No. I'm blowed if I can. What on earth's become of them all? I can hear 'em yelling like fiends, but I can't see any of 'em anywhere. Where the dickens have they hidden themselves, I wonder?"

Just at that moment the boat drew level with a low-lying strip of coast, and looking inland they saw a group of fully forty Chinese clustered round something which, judging from the noise they were making, was exciting their interest.

"They've discovered the treasure, thank goodness!" Billy remarked with a sigh of relief.

Roger looked up surprised. "Why thank goodness?" he asked. "They'll sneak the whole lot of it!"

"It doesn't matter if they do," Billy pointed out. "I'd

far sooner they bagged the lot than that we got killed. Don't you see, the treasure'll keep 'em busy, and then we'll be able to get to Hill Fort all right. Why, man!" he exclaimed, "it's the very best thing which could have happened."

"Well, I hope it does keep 'em busy," said Roger gloomily, "but it's jolly sickening to have all that stuff sneaked, all the same!"

It must be admitted that from the very outset the Chinese strategy had been faulty. They had landed, according to Ah Sing, close to the stream in Salvation Bay, and from their first movements he surmised that they contemplated attacking Hill Fort. He himself, meanwhile, had been trying to rejoin the boys unobserved, but had been sighted by one of the pirates. The man promptly yelled to his friends, and the whole lot of them, without stopping to think, set off in chase. This was the sudden outburst of yelling and musketry the boys had heard soon after finding the chest. At this stage of the proceedings the enemy were probably unaware that the boys were on the western part of the island; but when, during their chase of Ah Sing, they saw Billy and Roger running to his assistance, every available man promptly came along to help massacre the "foreign devils". How they tried to do this we already know.

Then had come the failure of their ammunition supply, necessitating, as the boys surmised, a return to the junk for a fresh stock before offensive operations could be resumed; and finally they had lighted upon the treasure chest.

This last incident brought about a sudden cessation of hostilities, and completely banished all thoughts of the boys from the pirates' minds. They saw within their grasp a quantity of gold and silver; they were free to take it away without let or hindrance, and their predatory instincts being uppermost, the newly-found hoard acted

upon them as a magnet does upon steel. Every man at once came rushing to the spot to secure his share before it all went. With the rich loot at their disposal the enemy lost all the cohesion or unanimity of purpose they ever had. It was everyone for himself, by fair means or foul, and in the excitement of the moment they quite forgot the boys and Ah Sing were making good their escape.

Their proper tactics, of course, would have been to make an attack on the hill directly they landed; an assault which must necessarily have ended in the capture of the summit since there was nobody there to defend it. The other party would thus have been cut off from their supplies of food, water, and ammunition, and their annihilation would only have been a matter of time, for once the small stock of cartridges they had with them was expended, they would have been practically defenceless.

But the pirates did nothing of the kind, and the boys and their Chinese ally were saved by a happy combination of circumstances; a fortunate series of happenings which seemed nothing more nor less than a direct and merciful intervention of Providence on their behalf.

The dinghy sailed on past Hardcastle Bay, and it was not until she was beyond Mulready Point that about half a dozen men detached themselves from the group by the cairn and came running towards the shore, with the idea, probably, of preventing the occupants of the boat from landing. They were soon close to the water's edge, and though they were all armed with rifles, and the dinghy was barely more than two hundred yards from the shore, fire was not opened.

"Shall I give 'em a shot or two?" Roger asked, as the enemy began to move along the beach abreast of the boat.

Billy nodded. The rifle rang out, but the movement upset the boy's aim, for the bullet splashed in the water about ten yards short of the beach. Still, it had its effect,

for the party retreated inland under cover of the scrub, though they still continued to move to the eastward with the object of opposing the landing.

Billy gave a short laugh. "They're evidently not very well up in the geography of this place," he remarked. "They're trying to cut us off, and they don't know there's the mangrove swamp between them and where we want to land!"

"Supposing they manage to get across it?" Roger suggested in rather an apprehensive voice.

"There are only six of 'em if they do," Billy pointed out, "and we ought to be able to keep 'em off with our rifles. Besides, I don't expect they've got any ammunition, or they'd have opened fire ages ago."

But he was wrong, for presently there came the familiar "clip clop" of a rifle from the shore, and a bullet splashed into the water about twenty yards short of the boat. Not a sign of the Chinese could be seen, however; but soon there came another report, and this time the missile came nearer.

"By Jove! This won't do!" exclaimed Billy, who was steering. "Look here, Roger. You and Ah Sing had better fire a round or two into those bushes; there, just to the left of that whitish patch on the beach. I believe that's where they are!" He pointed at the patch in which he thought the enemy were hidden.

Roger lay down in the bottom of the boat and balanced his weapon on the gunwale, Ah Sing following his example.

"Pop, pop," went their rifles almost simultaneously.

They could not see where the bullets went, but no more shots came from the shore, and presently, by the time the boat was entering Saracen Cove, the six pirates reappeared and began running along the beach as hard as they could pelt.

"They'll be in the swamp in a minute," said Billy,

watching them. "Ah! There goes the first!" for the leader's feet suddenly disappeared as he sank up to his knees in the treacherous ooze. "That's stopped 'em all right!" he added with a smile, for the whole party had come to an abrupt standstill and were jabbering excitedly, pointing first at the dinghy and then at the swamp ahead of them.

The boat by this time was barely more than fifty yards from them, and taking careful aim, Roger fired into the group. The bullet sped true, for one of the pirates suddenly dropped his rifle and then subsided on the ground with a screech.

Ah Sing then fired though with no result, but the enemy had had enough of it. They had not bargained for the swamp, and turning round began to run inland as fast as their legs would carry them, leaving their wounded companion where he had fallen. He, seeing he was being abandoned, at once set up a dismal howling; but his friends were too keen on saving their own precious skins to worry about him; the fire from the boat had been rather too telling to suit them.

"Oh, the beastly cowards! Fancy leaving that chap behind like that!" exclaimed Billy indignantly, watching the injured man crawling painfully on his hands and knees towards the fringe of scrub adjoining the beach. "Don't fire on him, Roger," he added, "give the poor chap a chance!"

Ah Sing, however, had no such scruples, for while Billy was speaking his rifle suddenly went off, and the bullet ploughed up a furrow within ten feet of the poor wretch as he was nearing the friendly growth which would hide him from his enemies.

"Ah Sing, you beast!" Roger shouted angrily, "what on earth are you doing?"

"My makee kill pilate," replied the Chinaman with a

grin, levelling his rifle again and squinting along the sights. Roger promptly reached across and knocked up the muzzle as he pulled the trigger, and the bullet flew off into the air.

Ah Sing looked very surprised. "Why for?" he demanded. "Pilate makee catch Ah Sing, makee kill!" He drew his finger across his throat with a horribly suggestive gesture.

It was quite true; the enemy would have had no compunction in firing upon a wounded man, but it seemed an unchivalrous un-English thing to do, all the same, and the boys did not like it.

"You shouldn't fire on a wounded man," said Billy disapprovingly. "It's not playing the game!"

Ah Sing looked more puzzled than ever. His sole idea was to kill his enemies, wounded or not, and he could not understand what possible objection there was.

"Why no kill?" he queried again.

"You mustn't fire on a wounded man," Roger explained.

"My no savvy," replied Ah Sing, shaking his head and looking very perplexed. To his Chinese mind it all seemed very strange, and from his point of view the boys had most peculiar ideas of warfare. But, of course, he recollect ed, all English people were slightly mad, so perhaps this accounted for this new whim. It was probably some new idea he had never heard about, for to him a wounded man who could only crawl on his hands and knees was a most suitable target; he was so much easier to hit. But though he looked longingly at his would-be victim as he disappeared into the bushes, he refrained from firing again.

There was no time for further talking, for the boat was already close to the shore, and lowering the sail, for they were under the lee of the land and the wind had dropped, they got out the oars and pulled for the beach.

A few minutes later her bows ran on the shingle with a crunch and the party disembarked.

"The question is now," Billy said, "what are we to do with the boat?"

"Let's haul her up above high-water mark," Roger suggested.

"That'll take too much time, I'm afraid," returned his companion. "We ought to get up to the fort as soon as we can. For all we know the Chinese may be coming up from the opposite side."

"Well, if we leave the boat here they're certain to bag her."

"The only thing to do," observed Billy regretfully, "is to scuttle her so she won't be any use to 'em. Let's put a hole in her bottom with one of these large stones."

"But supposing we want her again?"

"We'll have to trust to luck to being able to repair her. It's either that or the Chinamen getting hold of her, and if she's damaged they may not worry about taking her; wouldn't be worth their while."

They accordingly took out the mast, sail, oars, and other movable fittings, and lashing them together laid them close under the cliff, telling Ah Sing to pile some shingle over them so that they could not be seen from seaward.

"Now," said Billy, "we must sink her." He walked towards a large stone lying on the beach, with the idea of hurling it through the bottom of the boat, but Roger stopped him.

"I've a much better idea," he remarked. "Let's fire a couple of bullets through her bottom. They'll make quite small holes, and if we ever want her again we can plug 'em up with wood."

"Good idea!" answered his companion at once. "But we'd better put a few of these stones on board to make her sink, for she may float, even though she's full of water."

Hurry up! We mustn't be too long!" He cast an anxious glance at the hilltop above.

Two or three heavy stones were placed on board, and pushing her off a short distance from the beach, Roger waded out and fired his rifle twice through her bottom from the inside. The water gushed in in two little streams, and leaving her to her fate they quitted the beach.

On reaching the harder ground they walked about four hundred yards along the edge of the cliff towards Cape Martin before turning inland to negotiate the ascent. This was Billy's idea, and a very sound one it was, for if the enemy were still round about the cairn, the southern shoulder of the hill would effectually conceal the little party from their view during the climb, and they might even be able to reach Hill Fort without their movements being observed.

It was wearisome work, for all three of them were hungry and thirsty. The boys, too, were assailed by a vague dread that the enemy might have reached the fort before them, and in the great heat, for the day was now well advanced, their haste made the climb even more trying than it ordinarily was.

But on reaching the summit, breathless after their exertion, they found to their relief that their fears were groundless, for everything in the fort was exactly as they had left it early in the morning.

CHAPTER XX

The Attack on the Hill

THEIR first care was to load the magazines of all the rifles in case the Chinese should take it into their heads to make an immediate attack, and having done this they had time to look round them. Many of the enemy were still gathered round the spot where the treasure had been unearthed, but others were wending their way across the scrub-covered ground towards the stream. Presently, as they watched, a sampan pushed off from the beach and rowed off to the junk anchored in Salvation Bay. It was followed by another, and on getting alongside they waited for about five minutes and then returned to the shore together.

Billy went over to the tent and returned with the telescope, and lying down full length focused it on the spot where the men were collected round the treasure chest. The powerful glass brought the scene as close as if it was taking place only fifty yards away, instead of one and a half miles, and he could even see the movement of the men's mouths as they talked. Soon, as he looked, one of the Chinamen who had been to the beach came back and joined the group. Something heavy, wrapped up in a bundle, was placed in his arms, and slinging it over his shoulder he tramped off in the direction from which he had come.

Billy at once realized what they were doing. They had
(c 660)

found the treasure chest too heavy to move intact, and were removing its contents bit by bit to the junk.

"Blow!" he exclaimed angrily.

"What's up?" asked Roger.

"The brutes are sneaking all the stuff and are taking it off to their beastly junk. They'll bag the whole lot!"

"Bother them!" muttered Roger. "I thought that's what they were up to. Isn't there any way we can stop 'em?"

"Afraid not," the other boy said. "The place where the stuff was buried is nearly a mile and a half away, and it's jolly nearly a mile to where the stream runs into the bay. We might have a shot at the sampan as she goes off, but I doubt if it would be any good."

"Why not?"

"For one thing we should have to use the aperture sights on the rifles. You know, those things at the side," he explained, as the other boy looked puzzled. "And if we did hit 'em it would only be a mere fluke at such a range. No, I think we'd better hang on to all our ammunition; we may want every cartridge we've got, and if we did stop 'em now they'd only put it off till after dark."

"Yes, that's true enough," Roger was forced to admit. "I do call it a beastly shame, though!" he cried; "we found the stuff, and now they're stealing it all! Beasts! Beasts!"

Billy did not reply, though he too felt very angry, and contented himself with counting how many of the enemy he could see. There were, he found, between twenty and thirty in sight, and goodness only knows how many more on board the junk and concealed in the wood by the stream. But what alarmed him more than anything was that nearly all of them carried firearms. Some of these he knew were rifles, whereas some might be ancient flintlocks, but the fact that all of them carried weapons of some kind

was a bad sign in itself, for it showed that the descent on the island had been planned beforehand.

"Is that the junk you were on board?" he asked Ah Sing, for he thought that perhaps it was not the same.

"B'long orl same," answered the Chinaman with a nod. "B'long pilate junk. My savvy!"

Billy felt horribly nervous and depressed. Before the enemy landed they could have known nothing about the treasure, and there was only one other reason to account for their arrival, and that was, revenge.

There was good reason to be alarmed, for the defenders were outnumbered by fully ten to one, and though the food and water in the fort would last for some pretty considerable time, he had his doubts about the ammunition.

"I say, Roger," he said gloomily, drawing the other boy aside. "I don't like the look of this show at all. They're dead certain to attack. D'you know how much ammunition we've got left?"

"About a thousand rounds," replied the other. "There are nine full boxes of a hundred each, but we've used some out of the tenth."

"Sounds a good lot," said Billy, "but it only works out at just over three hundred apiece. We shall have to be jolly careful how we use it; one can fire away a hundred rounds as easy as winking. We mustn't fire unless we're certain of hitting."

"What about to-night, though?" asked Roger apprehensively. "D'you think they'll attack us then?"

"Shouldn't at all wonder, but if they do we ought to hear 'em all right, 'specially if the alarm guns go off."

"Yes, that's true, but I suppose one of us 'll have to be on the lookout the whole time?"

"You bet your boots. We'll have to take turns at doing sentry. Let's see, it's dark for about eight hours, perhaps a bit less."

Roger assented.

"Well," Billy went on to say, "supposing one of us goes on from about eight till eleven, another from eleven till two, and the third from then on to five. We can draw lots for it, but we'll have to guess the time."

"Yes, that's all right. But meanwhile I vote we have some food. I'm jolly thirsty and hungry, and it's long past dinner-time."

"I clean forgot about grub," remarked Billy, "but now that you mention it I'm jolly hungry too. Come on!"

By about four o'clock the Chinese had finished transporting their booty to the junk, and they all left the spot where it had been buried and moved off in the direction of the stream. They did not go off to the junk, however, and one or two could be seen wandering up and down the beach, while presently the smoke of a fire rising above the palms showed that the preparations for a meal were in progress.

Beyond their original onslaught the enemy had so far made no offensive movements, though by this time they must have been fully aware that the boys had taken refuge on the summit of the hill. To Billy the delay seemed rather ominous; he would far prefer the attack to have taken place at once. To have to wait with this awful feeling of suspense gnawing at his heart, and with the knowledge that fully thirty yellow-faced fiends were hatching heaven knows what mischief down there in the trees, made the position almost intolerable.

He was pondering over the situation for the thousandth time when he was startled by a squeaking sound behind him. At first he could not account for it, but then he suddenly noticed that the spar holding the block through which the rope passed to the valley below was bending. It sprang up and down with a jerking movement as if someone were tugging at the rope from below. Seizing a

rifle, and motioning to the others to keep quite still, he crawled to the edge on his hands and knees and peered over.

Three Chinamen were standing at the foot of the slope, while another was pulling on the rope evidently to see if it would bear his weight. So far they had not noticed they were being watched, and withdrawing his head Billy cocked his weapon. Then, pushing the rifle before him, he leaned over and took careful aim. At the same instant one of the men looked aloft and saw him, and, yelling something to his companions, turned tail and fled into the wood as fast as his legs would carry him.

But Billy pressed the trigger at the same moment, and one of the four dropped in a heap. He had no time to fire again, for all the others had disappeared, and a second or two later a bullet, fired from below, hummed through the air over his head. Then another, and another, and finally one hit a boulder with a vicious smack which sent the splinters flying. But Billy by this time was well under cover, and paid no attention to the senseless bombardment, for the Chinese had lost their heads at seeing one of their men dropped, and were simply wasting their ammunition in the air.

He realized, however, that the pulley was a source of danger, and rolling the boulder off the end of the spar, toppled the whole concern over the edge. This evoked another volley, with equally futile results. Apparently the four men, one of whom was now dead, for he had been hit through the skull, were simply a party of stragglers who had strayed through the wood out of sheer curiosity, and the boy was looking for further signs of them when he heard Roger's rifle go off. He at once crawled across to his friend's side.

"What are you firing at?" he asked anxiously, thinking, perhaps, that an attack was about to take place.

"I had a pot at a fellow who came out of the wood just by the eighth signpost," explained Roger, pointing through his loophole in the direction of Point Wedderburn.

"Hit him?" Billy queried.

"No, but it must have gone pretty close. He vanished like a rabbit. Did you get anyone?"

Billy nodded. "I wonder why your fellow didn't stumble over the strings of the alarm guns?" he asked.

"He was above 'em," Roger answered. "I think he simply came out to see what all the firing was about."

The afternoon wore on, and though several of the enemy could be seen on the beach and on board the junk, while the two sampans made frequent trips between the vessel and the shore, they made no movements which might be taken as the preliminaries for an attack. They had already had proof that the defenders were tolerably good shots, and as they had lost several men without inflicting the least damage on the boys, they doubtless thought it wiser to keep out of effective rifle range.

Both the lads, however, had come to the conclusion that an onslaught could be expected after dark, and they rather dreaded the idea of it, for though the attackers would be greatly hindered by the boulder-strewn slopes of the hill, the defending party would not be able to see the sights of their rifles, and the conflict, therefore, would probably develop into a furious hand-to-hand affair. It made them nervous, as well it might, for not only were they hopelessly outnumbered, but they had no suitable weapons for repelling the attack beyond Ah Sing's captured sword, which he had insisted on bringing with him, and one axe. There was no disguising the gravity of the situation, and the more Billy thought about it the more depressed he became.

Towards sunset both sampans, crowded with men, went off to the junk. At first the boys thought the Chinese

intended to spend the night on board, but when they saw them all collecting in the bows of the ungainly craft, the idea suddenly leapt into Billy's mind that perhaps they contemplated weighing the anchor and sailing away.

"I say, Roger," he burst out, "d'you think they're off? They all seem pretty busy there. I wonder what's up?"

"Don't know," said the other, but in a rather hopeful tone of voice. "They're jolly busy about something, as you say. By Jove, though," he added, "I do hope they're going to clear out! To tell the truth, I'm rather funkering the idea of being attacked!"

"It seems quite likely," returned his companion. "Perhaps they're satisfied with the loot, and won't worry about us."

"I hope so," remarked Roger, picking up the glass and levelling it. "No," he added with a pause. "I don't believe they're weighing the anchor. They seem to be busy about something, but they're certainly not hauling in the cable. Have a look." He handed the telescope across.

For some seconds Billy gazed at the junk without speaking, and then he suddenly caught a glimpse of something on board the junk which looked suspiciously like a gun. He looked again, and a closer scrutiny showed him that his idea was correct, for he could distinctly make out a small old-fashioned weapon mounted on a wooden carriage. The men were clustered round it, pointing first at the hill and then at their antiquated weapon, and there was no doubt as to what was about to happen.

"I say," he exclaimed nervously, "they've got a gun there, and it looks to me as if they were going to bombard us!"

"Great Scott!" cried Roger, feeling very frightened,

and conjuring up visions of a six-inch quickfirer throwing lyddite shell. "We shan't be able to stay up here if they fire. What had we better do?"

"Stick tight till we see what happens," Billy advised. "I say, Ah Sing," he added, turning round, "what sort of gun have they got on board the junk?"

"Gun, wa b'long?" asked the Chinaman, wrinkling his forehead, as he always did when puzzled.

"Gun. Cannon. Make much noise," Billy explained, imitating the sound of a gun going off as best he could.

"Hi yah! My savvy. Gun haf got. Olo piecee, makee plenty bobbery!"

"He says it's an old one," said Roger more cheerfully, "so that's some consolation. Perhaps it won't carry as far as this."

"I hope not, but if it gets dangerous we shall have to try having shots at 'em with the rifles, although they're an awful distance off."

They had not very long to wait, for about five minutes later all the Chinese except two left the bows of the junk and retreated farther aft. The two who remained adjusted the weapon until its muzzle was cocked up in the air pointing direct at the hilltop, and a second or two later one man applied something to the breech.

There was a brilliant flash and a cloud of white smoke, and as the sound of the report came to their ears, the shot from the venerable weapon struck up a fountain of sand and shingle on the beach. Its arrival was greeted by a pandemonium of yells and screams from the Chinese still in the wood down by the stream, for the projectile, having only carried about six hundred yards, had pitched quite close to where they had been sitting.

"Bad shot, old cock!" said Roger with a grin, as numbers of blue-clad figures rushed out on to the beach and began yelling at the pitch of their lungs to their

friends in the junk. "Go on, have another shot! You'll hit some of your own pals presently!"

It was really rather amusing, for it was quite obvious that however hard the Chinamen tried, they would never get the weapon to carry as far as the summit. But in spite of its futility the gunners were determined to have another shot with their ancient piece of ordnance, for re-loading it, and giving the muzzle greater elevation, they fired again.

There was the same flash and the same cloud of smoke, and this time the shot actually did reach the shore, ploughing up a spout of earth about twenty yards above high-water mark. But the result on board the junk herself was completely unexpected. Practically simultaneously with the discharge, Billy thought he saw a splash in the water close alongside her, and when a second or two later more wild shouts and yells came from the junk, it became obvious that something out of the ordinary had occurred. It was a still evening, with practically no wind, and when the dense cloud of smoke had cleared away he levelled his telescope. To his intense surprise he saw the weapon was no longer there.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" he ejaculated. "The old gun's disappeared!"

"Silly blighters put too much powder in it, I expect," said Roger with a grin. "Has it exploded?"

"No, I don't think so. They must have overloaded it, and the recoil bust up everything and chucked the rotten old thing overboard. I saw a splash in the water. How jolly funny!" He burst into a shriek of laughter.

"We needn't have been funky at all," remarked Roger. "But fancy expecting a thing like that to carry this distance!"

Although the boys did not know it, the accident had not let the enemy off scathless. The weapon had been

loaded almost to the muzzle with powder and the ball rammed home on top, and although the metal itself had stood the strain, the terrific recoil of the discharge had burst the lashings securing the carriage to the deck, and the whole concern had gone overboard, severely mangling two of the pirates on its way. It was lucky for the defenders, for although the weapon could never have done them much harm, the disaster could not fail to demoralize the superstitious Chinese.

Presently, however, leaving two or three men on board, the enemy tumbled into the sampans and returned to the shore, and hauling their boats up on to the beach disappeared into the wood.

As the sun disappeared over the rim of the horizon everything became unnaturally still. Not a sound could be heard; not a bird twittered in the trees below; and to Billy the dead silence seemed oppressive and ominous. The night was upon them, and he dreaded to think of what the hours of darkness might bring.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the brilliant reds and yellows faded from the evening sky. The blue of the heavens darkened from azure to deep purple blue, and one by one the stars came out and shed their pale brilliance over land and sea. The ruddy gleam of a fire in the wood by the stream shone on the calm inky surface of the bay, but somehow the flickering dancing light sent the terror creeping to the boys' hearts. They realized an awful feeling of loneliness and helplessness; a horrible sensation of fear overpowered them, and they instinctively huddled together for mutual protection.

"I say, Bill," Roger said rather shamefacedly, "I'm feeling in an awful—er—you know what I mean," he concluded rather lamely.

"What, in a funk?" asked his companion, who did not feel at all cheerful himself.

"No, hardly a funk. But I'm feeling jolly frightened that I shall be in one when the time comes."

"I know exactly what you mean," answered the other rather mournfully. "It's so rotten having to wait like this. It's the suspense and all the thinking about it which makes it so bad."

"Yes, it's not so bad when it starts. I didn't feel in a funk this afternoon when Ah Sing nearly got collared. I was so jolly excited."

"Well, don't let's think about it," Billy suggested. "It's high time we had something to eat, and after that two of us had better turn in while the other chap goes on sentry. We'll draw lots for it."

Supper was soon under way, and during the meal it was decided that Roger should take the first watch till eleven o'clock; Billy, from then until two a.m.; and Ah Sing from that time to five o'clock in the morning, by which time it would be daylight.

Half an hour later Billy and Ah Sing had turned in, and Roger was left alone to guard the little camp. He felt nervous and lonely as he marched up and down, rifle on shoulder, and stopping every now and then to peer down the hill, but no suspicious sounds came up from below, and as the time went on he began to feel less frightened.

At eleven o'clock, as near as he could judge, he went across to the tent and roused Billy, and crawling inside himself, was soon snuggling down under the blankets.

When Billy began his weary vigil there was no moon, but the stars gave enough light to make the outline of the nearer boulders distinctly visible. The trees down towards Point Wedderburn showed up dimly as a blurred indefinite patch of darker shadow, but beyond this very little could be seen, for thin wreaths of mist ascending from the heated ground overhung the lower portions of the island. The fire down on the beach had gone out, and not a sound disturbed

the dead silence of the night. Everything seemed horribly uncanny and strange. The island looked so different somehow to what it did in broad daylight, and for the first half hour or so of his watch he experienced exactly the same sensations as Roger had felt. The gaunt grotesque shapes of the boulders alarmed him. Time after time he could have sworn he saw dark shadowy figures lurking behind them, but he knew all the time, in his heart of hearts, that he was only suffering from an attack of nerves, for no one could have climbed the hill without betraying his presence. But his thoughts were not happy as he tramped up and down, and how he ever managed to get through the three long hours without firing his rifle at some imaginary pirate he never quite understood. But he succeeded in controlling himself somehow, and called Ah Sing at the prearranged time, and after giving him full instructions what to do, crawled into the tent and lay down by Roger's side.

The feeling of companionship did something to take away the awful feeling of loneliness he had experienced out on the bleak hillside. He was very tired, mentally and physically exhausted, and before long he had dropped off into a deep slumber.

As he slept all the events of the day passed through his mind in an exaggerated series of dreams. He dreamt of Ah Sing with his bloodstained sword; of a gigantic treasure chest which flew open directly he touched the lid, to disclose a grinning skeleton inside. Then the scene suddenly changed, and he was back on board the *Saracen*. He knew it was the *Saracen*, because Captain Wedderburn, Mr. Hardcastle, and all the other officers were on board; but the ship had altered greatly since he had last seen her, for she now carried peculiar mat sails like a Chinese junk. It was really rather mystifying, and though, somehow, he knew he was only dreaming, he found himself wondering why the alteration in rig had been made. Then he found

himself back in the galley watching the cook at work. The ship seemed to be rolling very heavily. He could hear people shouting—and then he suddenly woke, to find Ah Sing pulling him violently by the arm.

"Massa! Massa Beely!" the man exclaimed. "Pilate makee bobbery bottomside!"

Billy rolled out of his blankets at once, shouting to Roger to do the same, and crawling out of the tent together they seized their rifles and ran to the boulder breast-work overlooking Point Wedderburn.

It was nearly dawn, and already the light was strong enough to make the whole island distinctly visible, and although no signs of the pirates themselves could be seen, the dead stillness of the morning made their strident chattering quite audible, although they were over half a mile away. Whether an attack was about to be made remained to be seen, but the boys completed their preparations by placing little piles of cartridges and the spare rifles within easy reach, and having done this lay down on the ground and waited with their eyes glued on the corner of the wood near which the attackers must emerge if they had decided upon an assault.

For fully a quarter of an hour they remained motionless, speaking to each other in low whispers, and then, just as the red globe of the sun appeared over the eastern horizon and dyed the whole heavens a vivid rose pink, one of the alarm guns suddenly went off.

It was instantly followed by a chorus of yells and a splutter of musketry fire. The alarm guns had done their work, for on the discharge the enemy instantly came to the conclusion that the boys and Ah Sing were hiding in the wood, and promptly emptied their magazines in the direction of the report. For fully a minute the uproar continued, and then the origin of their panic must have been discovered, for, quite suddenly, the firing and shouting died away.

Then a blue-clad figure carrying a rifle came running out of the wood about a thousand yards down the hill. He was followed by another, then another and another, until Billy could count fifteen.

They were a long way off, but putting the backsight of his rifle up as far as it would go, he took careful aim and pressed the trigger. At the great range he could scarcely hope to hit, but as the bullet whistled over their heads and told them they were under fire, the pirates promptly disappeared behind boulders.

Presently another little bunch of men came trotting out of cover and flung themselves on the ground, taking advantage of what protection they could get, and a second or two later the rifle flashes far down the hillside showed they were getting to work. The bullets began to drone overhead, while others, striking short, ricochetted through the air with savage whines. But as yet the range was too great for any execution to be done, and Billy told his companions to reserve their fire until they could make more certain of hitting.

The attackers soon began to advance up the hill one by one. They made short dashes of about twenty yards, and then bobbed down to take cover, keeping up a furious fire the whole time. Some of their bullets came close, too close to be pleasant, but the defenders were tolerably safe behind their breastwork, and Billy congratulated himself on his foresight in making the loopholes.

"They've got to the last flag, the eight-hundred-yard one!" shouted Roger breathlessly. "I saw a fellow plop down just alongside it."

"Right you are!" said Billy calmly, for now that the affair had started he had lost all his original nervousness. "Give 'em a shot every now and then, but don't start firing fast until they get closer."

Roger, like Billy, felt strangely elated. His fear had

given way to an intense excitement which made him long to come to actual grips with his enemies, while Ah Sing, judging from the way he grinned whenever a bullet came anywhere near, apparently regarded the whole thing as an enormous joke.

But nearer and nearer came their opponents, and though as yet none of them had been hit, the carefully directed shots of the defenders had the effect of keeping down the hostile fire and made the Chinese less anxious to expose themselves.

It was close by the six-hundred-yard flag that the first man met his fate, and it was Ah Sing who fired the shot, for he gave a chuckle of delight when he saw the figure he had aimed at collapse in a stricken heap. But still the others came on.

Five hundred yards—four hundred yards.

The enemy's fire grew hotter, and the boys began to ply their weapons faster.

“Crack, crack—crack—crack, crack.”

“Hurrah, there's another!” screamed Billy as he saw his man pitch forward to his knees.

But hardly were the words out of his mouth when a violent blow on the shoulder nearly sent him flat on his back. The wooden forepart of his rifle, protruding through the loophole, had been hit a glancing blow by a flying bullet, but recovering himself he seized another weapon and went on firing.

Four of the enemy now lay stark on the hillside, for both Roger and Ah Sing had succeeded in dropping another each; but the remainder were not daunted by their losses, for they still came on, firing as they approached. The air seemed full of flying nickel and lead. The boys' rifles became so hot that they could hardly hold them; but affairs were getting serious, and they worked their bolts as fast as they could. Billy himself felt dizzy with excitement. His

shoulder was numb, but he did not heed it, and the actions of loading, aiming, and firing became half mechanical.

The assaulters were now within three hundred yards of the summit, but had abandoned their tactics of rushing from boulder to boulder, and crawled from cover to cover on their hands and knees. There was consequently very little to aim at, and Billy was beginning to despair of ever being able to repel them. But he kept his eyes glued along his sights and was keeping them steady on a boulder, over the top of which he presently expected an enemy to rise, when Ah Sing, on the extreme right, created a sudden diversion. At first Billy thought he had been wounded, for the Chinaman let rip a terrific yell, and rising to his feet dashed across the plateau in the direction of the tent.

"Come back, Ah Sing! Come back!" he screamed.

The enemy saw the flying figure and redoubled their fire, but by some miracle he was not hit, and flinging himself down behind a boulder began emptying his magazine down the southern side of the hill.

The boy now understood what had happened, and an awful sensation of fear came over him. Ah Sing, from his former position, had been able to see the other slope, and it was obvious from the way he worked his rifle that an attack was coming from that direction.

Billy did not know what to do, for the enemy in front were barely more than two hundred yards distant, and he wavered a minute, trying to reckon up the chances. But Ah Sing was shouting for assistance, and, yelling to Roger to remain where he was, Billy withdrew his rifle from the loophole and began to worm his way along under the cover of the breastwork towards where Ah Sing was lying. He was soon close to him, and, sheltering himself as best he could, poked his head out from behind a boulder and peered cautiously down the hill. The very instant he did so a bullet hit the rock with a vicious smack barely more than

six inches above his head and made the splinters fly. He withdrew under cover at once. But he had seen quite enough.

Three Chinamen with rifles, who had advanced unseen up the southern side of the hill, were lying prone on the grass within five yards of the summit.

The situation was desperate. The hill was assailed from both sides.

CHAPTER XXI

Despair

FOR a second or two Billy remained motionless behind his boulder, trying to think what he ought to do to frustrate this new danger. But his brain seemed paralysed; he could not, somehow, collect his scattered wits, and all he remembered was his fleeting vision of those three prone figures out there on the hillside.

How many more were attacking from the same direction? He began to wonder if Ah Sing, who was still firing, had succeeded in killing any of them. Then he mechanically put his hand to his forehead to wipe away something wet and warm which would run down into his eyes, and when he withdrew it he noticed his palm was bright crimson. Blood!

He stared at it in amazement, for in the excitement of the moment he had not realized that a sharp splinter of rock had made a jagged wound in his forehead. It seemed strange that he only felt a dull throbbing, and he was beginning to wonder why it did not hurt more, when Ah Sing leapt to his feet with a yell, and jumped over the boulder in front of him.

Billy looked out over his rock, hardly understanding what was going on, and saw his ally dash towards the three men on the ground. One of them lay still, for he had been shot through the head, but the other two rose to their knees to receive the attack. But Ah Sing was on

the first before he could get to his feet. The doomed man, seeing his adversary approaching, fired his rifle from the knee. The shot went wide, and the next moment his life had paid forfeit, for the butt of Ah Sing's weapon had descended on his head, and he fell backwards on the ground.

The other man succeeded in rising, but his weapon was unloaded, and seeing his companion fall, came to the conclusion that he would be served the same fate, and turned and began to run down the hill for his life. Billy's rifle went up at once, and he pressed the trigger almost without taking aim, but the range was so short that he could hardly miss, and the flying figure fell headlong.

The attack from the rear was repulsed, for it had only been undertaken by three men, and all of these were now accounted for. But the assault was being pushed forward from the other direction, for the sound of the hostile rifles was coming closer and closer, and glancing over his shoulder, Billy caught a momentary glimpse of one of the enemy bobbing down behind a boulder barely fifty yards from the summit.

“Come on, Ah Sing!” he yelled, racing back to the breastwork, regardless of the bullets which flew round him.

The Chinaman followed his example, and they both reached cover in safety, and reloading their rifles, peered out through the loopholes in front of them. During their temporary absence the enemy had gained much ground, for Roger's fire, though he had accounted for two more men, had not been sufficient to check the advance of the others. The bullets came like hail; the air seemed full of them, and their terrific impact sent up a perpetual shower of earth and splinters from the breastwork. Billy could see the flashes of the enemy's rifles, but their users were so well concealed that there was little to fire at. He kept

his sights laid on the top of a boulder, however, and at last his chance came.

A head suddenly appeared over the top; it was followed by a pair of enormous shoulders, and at the same instant the boy fired. At first he thought he had missed, for his adversary remained in full view, but a second later the man toppled over to one side, dead. He had, though he did not know it, killed the leader of the attacking party, and a wild shout of rage greeted the effect of his shot. An instant later the hostile fire died away, and five men suddenly broke cover and came dashing up the hill.

"Bang, bang, bang," went the defenders' rifles.

One man collapsed and lay still; another dropped his rifle, clutched his right arm and shrieked, and then turned and ran down the hill. But the three others still came on.

Thirty yards—twenty yards.

They seemed to have charmed lives, for though the bullets flew round them like hail, they still dashed on.

Ten yards—

Billy stood up and took careful aim at the leading figure. He pressed the trigger, but the rifle gave a feeble click. He had exhausted the contents of the magazine!

Roger's rifle spoke, and another man dropped; but the other two came on.

Billy could see their sweat-streaked faces; their horrible expression of rage and hate; and as there was no time to reload, he seized his weapon by the muzzle and poised it ready for a blow.

But the men never reached the summit. Ah Sing was in the same predicament as Billy, and had armed himself with his captured sword, and before either of the boys realized what he was about, he had leapt out over the breastwork to meet the attackers.

The enemy saw him coming, and wavered; then one turned to flee, slipped to the ground, and in an instant

his antagonist was upon him. The blade of the sword flashed, and the wretch collapsed in a stricken heap.

The sole survivor was now between Ah Sing and the summit, and then, to Billy's horror, he suddenly saw him lift his rifle and take careful aim at Ah Sing's back. The boy tried to warn his friend, but the words stuck in his throat, and it was Roger who saved the situation, for flinging up his weapon he fired at once. The shot went wide, but it was close enough to make the man understand his precarious position, and turning round he levelled his rifle full at his new opponent. But before he could fire Ah Sing, who had somehow lost his sword, sprang upon him with his bare hands, and clutched him round the neck.

The pirate, little expecting the assault, dropped his rifle and endeavoured to free himself. But his opponent's fingers were round his throat, and for some seconds the pair wrestled fiercely to and fro, each trying to throw the other. Then the pirate remembered the knife in his belt, and put down his hand to draw it. Ah Sing saw the movement and guessed his intention, and not daring to release his hold, nerved himself for a supreme effort, and swung his adversary almost off his feet. His manœuvre succeeded, for his victim fell to the ground with a crash, with his assailant on top of him, while the shock sent the knife flying through the air. The doomed wretch fought with all his strength, but Ah Sing's powerful fingers were slowly crushing the life out of him. The boys instinctively looked the other way; they both felt horribly ill, and it was not until they heard their ally returning that they dared to look round.

"Can do, massa!" exclaimed Ah Sing breathlessly.
"Makee finish!"

Billy shuddered with horror, for fighting with nature's weapons seemed so utterly different to using a rifle.

"Hi yah!" burst out Ah Sing again. "Pilate makee lun!"

It was true; the remainder of the attackers who had not advanced on the summit were rushing down the slope as fast as their legs would carry them, and though one or two shots were fired at their backs, they all escaped scathless into the wood.

"Thank goodness!" muttered Billy from the very bottom of his heart, dropping on the ground from sheer exhaustion. "Thank goodness!"

Roger came over to talk to him, and then for the first time noticed the blood on his friend's face.

"I say," he said, panting heavily, "what's the matter with your head? It's all bleeding!"

"Nothing much," said Billy in a husky voice. "A splinter of rock got me across the forehead. You might get me a drink of water, though."

"Of course I will," Roger answered, running off towards the tent.

He came back an instant later with a ghastly expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" Billy asked in a whisper, noticing his look.

"The water!" ejaculated Roger in a scared voice. "The water's nearly all gone!"

Billy's heart nearly stopped beating, and faint with anxiety he rose to his feet and staggered towards the tent, at the back of which they had stowed the water casks.

It was only too true. Of the three barrels full of water which had been there earlier in the morning, two had been perforated through and through by bullets fired by the men who had attacked from the southward, and the sodden condition of the ground showed only too well where the contents had gone. The third cask had been struck three-

quarters of the way down, and as a result all the water above this level had run out, only a small quantity being left in the bottom.

Billy was too horrified to speak, for he fully realized what the awful discovery meant. They could not exist on the sun-baked hill without water, and in the bottom of the barrel they only had enough for thirty-six hours' use, even by putting themselves on the barest possible allowance.

Suppose the Chinese did not intend to leave the island? Suppose they made another attack on the hill?

With a supply of the precious fluid he would have felt hopeful, particularly as the first onslaught had been successfully repulsed. Without it he knew their situation was desperate, for they could never hope to replenish their stock from the stream without being discovered by the enemy, and even if a small quantity was procured it would only prolong the agony.

The boy felt his face quivering with suppressed emotion, for this was the last straw. Perhaps it would rain. He knew the rainy season was due soon, and looked round the horizon with a feeble glimmer of hope in his heart, but not a cloud marred the azure beauty of the sky. He went into the bullet-riven tent and returned with the telescope, and swept it slowly round the horizon in the vain longing that he might see a ship. He knew before he did it there was no hope, and the result of his scrutiny only made him doubly certain.

"Is there anything?" queried Roger with a catch in his voice, for the same awful thoughts had been passing through his mind.

"No, not a thing!" said Billy with a dry sob in his throat, bowing his head to conceal the tears which would come to his eyes. "Not a thing!"

Roger looked at him in dead silence, and even Ah Sing

did not venture any remark, for he too fully understood the gravity of the situation.

"Well," said Roger at last, and in a very gloomy voice, "I suppose there's no chance of our being able to get any more water while the Chinese are here. If they don't go away we'll—" He hesitated.

"I quite understand," put in Billy. "You mean if they don't go away we shall probably die of thirst?"

The other boy nodded. "Yes," he returned, "it's either that, or—"

"Or what?"

"Trying to fight our way down to the stream."

"Not much chance of our being able to do that," Billy said. "It may rain," he suggested, though he knew well enough that the wish was father to the thought.

"Doesn't look much like it at present," Roger remarked glumly.

"Well, at any rate it's no good talking about it. Let's each have a cup of water and something to eat. If we do run short later on we shall have to get down to the stream or the pool somehow. Yes, we'll have to!" he repeated emphatically. "I'm blowed if I'm going to be kept up here by a lot of pirates!"

Billy felt the fighting instinct strong in him, and his defiant attitude certainly put new heart into Roger.

The next few hours passed off without incident, but as the sun rose higher in the heavens the heat on the little plateau became more and more unendurable.

Gradually, as the morning drew on, the boys' thirst began to make them feel miserable. By noon their throats were dry and parched, their tongues felt swollen, and they both began to cast surreptitious glances at the water cask, each one hoping that the other would suggest another pannikinful of water apiece. Ah Sing too was experiencing the same thoughts, but although they all longed

for someone else to say the word nobody did so. They endured the agony, the acute agony of extreme thirst, in dead silence.

They all knew that one cupful apiece every eight hours would exhaust their available supply in less than two days, and that, if the Chinese made no signs of departure by that time, they might have to cut the allowance even shorter. Billy found himself reckoning out how long it would be before the next draught would fall due. He judged it would be at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Three more hours; would he ever be able to endure it?

The water cask tempted him. His head throbbed with the pain of his wound, and he could do nothing but conjure up visions of the stream below whenever he shut his eyes. He saw the clear water running over the smooth boulders; he imagined the whorls and spirals in its surface as it tumbled and played over its uneven bed; he could almost hear the gentle liquid murmur of its movement. The vision tantalized him, mocked him. It was so horribly realistic.

The feeling of absolute helplessness was becoming unendurable, and hardly daring to trust himself to the neighbourhood of the water cask, he dragged himself to his feet, and taking the telescope with him, walked wearily to the breastwork overlooking Point Wedderburn.

One of the sampans with some ten men in her was moving slowly out to the junk from the shore. He watched her with a ray of hope in his heart, thinking, perhaps, that the enemy were about to leave.

But no. The sampan drew alongside the junk, three men clambered out, and on looking through the telescope the boy saw them passing some cases down into the boat. Then she returned to the beach, and more men came out of the wood and carried the cases ashore. They seemed heavy, and on looking again Billy realized what the enemy had been doing. They had merely gone off to the junk to pro-

cure more ammunition, and that meant—he hardly dared to think of it—that another attack on the hill was contemplated.

A feeling of awful despair gnawed at his heart. Another attack! It was too terrible to think about, for he felt in his mind that it would be impossible to repel it.

"What are you looking at, Bill?" said Roger's voice behind him.

"They've been landing more ammunition," Billy answered with a catch in his voice, for he was on the verge of breaking down again. "More ammunition," he said slowly; "do you understand what that means?"

Roger nodded. "Another shot at taking the hill, I suppose."

"Yes."

"D'you think we'll be able to drive 'em off?" the other asked nervously.

Billy did not reply for a minute or two. "I don't know," he said wearily. "If we'd had water I would have felt hopeful, but now—" he shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of despair. "I don't know what'll happen. We can't last for ever."

"Buck up, old man," said Roger consolingly, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Come and lie down in the tent for a bit. That's a nasty cut you've got on your forehead, and it'll do you good to get a little sleep."

"Sleep! I can't go to sleep while those beasts down there are getting ready to attack us again," his companion replied with a mirthless laugh. "I wish, though," he added wistfully, "I could have a little water; I'd give anything for a drink."

Roger thought hard for a minute. "Look here," he said suddenly. "I'll go without my next allowance if you'll drink it now."

He knew full well what hours of poignant agony he would have to endure if Billy accepted his offer, for even

now he was half frantic with his thirst. Still, prompted by a noble instinct he was prepared, and even anxious, to sacrifice himself for the sake of his wounded companion.

But Billy would have none of it. "Don't talk rot, Roger!" he exclaimed, almost severely. "I'm not badly wounded, and even if I was I wouldn't dream of taking your allowance. All the same," he added, grasping his friend by the hand, "it was jolly good of you to offer it. Jolly good, but you needn't think I'd be such a beast as to take it."

The time passed slowly, and at last, when they judged it was three o'clock, another pannikin of the precious water was served out all round. Roger and Ah Sing, overcome with thirst, drank their share in hasty gulps, but Billy consumed his drop by drop, trying to make it last out as long as he possibly could. It vanished all too soon, but lukewarm and unrefreshing as it was, it put new life into him, and going into the tent he returned with a few biscuits and a tin of preserved meat. He felt ravenously hungry, but yet disinclined to eat; but knowing that food, however unpalatable, would help to keep up his strength, forced himself to eat a few mouthfuls and persuaded his companions to do the same.

The little meal was consumed in dead silence, for they were all far too depressed to think of conversation, and for some minutes after they had finished eating they sat gazing at the water cask longing for another drink.

It was Ah Sing who eventually broke the silence.

"My tink can catch water," he suddenly exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "S'pose pilate down bottom side makee sleep," he waved his hand towards the stream, "my can catch water. My tink orl lite, eh?"

"No," said Billy decisively, struggling to his feet and seizing the Chinaman by the arm. "No, you mustn't do it. You don't know where the pirates are, and they may be prowling about all over the island."

Ah Sing, hardly understanding what the boy said, realized from his gestures that his plan was being objected to, and looked rather depressed.

"S'pose my go down dere," he said at last, pointing to the spot where the pulley had overhung the precipice. "Plaps can find lope."

"No," protested Billy again. "You can't possibly do it. We haven't got a rope long enough to reach the bottom, and if you did go down Roger and I could never haul you up again. What d'you think about it?" he asked, turning to the other boy.

"No good at all," Roger announced. "He can't go down by himself; he'd be dead certain to be spotted. If the worst does come to the worst and the water does run out we must all go down together, and then we'll have far more chance."

"Precious little," muttered Billy to himself.

"Yes, jolly little," Roger agreed, hearing the remark. "But it's worse than useless for Ah Sing to go down alone. Supposing he did, and got caught, what then?"

Billy merely shrugged his shoulders, for there was no answer to this argument. It was quite evident that without the Chinaman's assistance they could never repel another attack on the hill, particularly if it came from both sides at once.

Ah Sing, much against his will, was eventually dissuaded from making the hazardous attempt, and walking to the edge of the plateau the two boys looked to see if they could detect any signs of movement on the part of the Chinese. But everything was quite still, nobody could be seen on board the junk or on the beach by the wood, and not a sound disturbed the stillness of the afternoon.

"I wonder what they're doing?" Roger asked.

"Probably fast asleep," answered Billy looking round with a yawn, and putting one hand up to his forehead.

"None of 'em are mouching about anywhere. Bah!" he continued, with a shudder, eyeing the horrible-looking corpses strewn on the hillside. "The sight of those," he nodded his head in their direction, "makes me feel quite ill."

Roger nodded. "Why don't you go and lie down in the tent for a bit?" he suggested, noticing Billy's worn-out look.

"I think I will; this heat's making my head throb like anything."

"Do, I'm sure it'll do you good. Ah Sing and I can keep a lookout, and we'll wake you if anything happens. I don't feel a bit fagged myself, but of course I haven't got a smack on my head."

Billy walked off, and crawling into the tent lay down on the blankets. The interior seemed deliciously cool after the glare and heat on the sun-baked summit outside, and though he had imagined he would never be able to close his eyes in slumber, the meal he had eaten produced its effect, and in a quarter of an hour he was sleeping peacefully.

The hours passed wearily, and the afternoon drew on, and sitting side by side on the parapet overlooking the cove, Roger and Ah Sing maintained their watch on the wood in which the enemy were. It soon became monotonous, for the Chinese still showed no signs of movement, and though Roger had said he did not feel tired, the exciting events of the early morning had exhausted him, and several times he found himself dozing, and woke up with a start to wonder how long he had been unconscious. At first he had amused himself by talking to Ah Sing, but the spasmodic and desultory conversation had died a natural death, until at length they sat silent like a couple of graven images.

By seven o'clock it was appreciably cooler, and a gentle breeze came off the sea from the north-eastward and

stirred Roger's hair. He slid off the breastwork with a yawn and stretched himself, thanking Providence for the cool refreshing wind, and looking at Ah Sing saw that he, too, had succumbed to his exhaustion and had gone off into a deep sleep. Leaving him, he went across to the tent and saw that Billy was still slumbering, and going on past the shivered remains of the water casks gazed out towards the horizon in the hope of seeing a ship; but nothing was there, nothing except the everlasting monotony of sky and sea.

The boy gave a little gesture of despair, and then, quite unconsciously, shifted his gaze until his line of sight rested on the southern slope of the hill. He stood regarding the prospect for a moment without interest, but then his attention was suddenly drawn by something moving far away and quite close to the water's edge. He looked intently at the spot, thinking he had been mistaken, for the place he was gazing at was fully a mile and a half away. But no, the movement went on, and though he was quite unable to distinguish what caused it, it seemed as if something was moving slowly in and out of the boulders on the lower slopes quite close to Saracen Cove.

Seized by a vague foreboding of evil he dropped to his knees behind a boulder, knowing that his figure would be seen silhouetted against the sky by anyone below, and after deliberating a moment, determined to make a fuller investigation. Crawling on his hands and knees to the spot close by the tent where Billy had dropped the telescope, he returned with it to the boulder and focused it on the hummock close to where he imagined he had detected the movement. But even though the powerful glass made the dun-coloured rock as clearly visible as if it was only twenty yards distant, he could see nothing amiss. He then came to the conclusion that he had been deceived by the heat rising from the ground, which, when the weather is very

hot, invariably imparts a peculiar quivering motion to all distant objects.

He gave a low laugh of relief, thinking how foolish his fears had been, and then gave another look just to make certain there was nothing there. This time he nearly dropped the telescope in alarmed astonishment, for close by the boulder at which he had been looking a short time before, the blue-clad figure of a Chinaman, with a rifle in his hand, was slowly moving up the hill on his hands and knees.

The man evidently had no suspicion his movements were observed—he was probably unaware that the defenders possessed a powerful glass—for a moment later he stopped, and, rising to his knees, waved an arm to somebody still out of sight.

Almost immediately four more figures came into view from a small dip in the ground and joined their companion on the hillside. Then another, and another, and another, ran stooping across the open space, until eight of them were congregated close to the spot where Roger had seen the first man. They halted there, and, flinging themselves on the ground, held a consultation of some kind, and dropping the telescope the boy dashed across to the opposite side of the plateau for his rifle, and to warn Ah Sing.

The Chinaman was still fast asleep when he reached him, and while shaking him by the shoulder he instinctively glanced down the hill. What he saw brought another wave of terror surging to his heart, for close to where the wood by Point Wedderburn gave way to the bare boulder-strewn slope, another party of the enemy had halted in full view of the summit. He could not stop to count them, but their presence could only mean one thing. Their dead silence throughout the long afternoon was accounted for; the hill was about to be attacked from both sides simultaneously.

CHAPTER XXII

The Last Fight

ROGER's first thought, naturally enough, was to rouse Billy, and dashing to the tent he seized his friend by the arm.

"Billy!" he shouted breathlessly. "Wake up! Wake up! We're going to be attacked again; they're coming from both sides!"

Billy, though half-dazed with sleep, was up in an instant, and snatching his rifle ran out on to the plateau and looked down the southern slope.

"I don't see anyone," he remarked, shading his eyes with his hand, and hoping that the other boy had been mistaken.

"No, there's nobody in sight now," Roger agreed. "But I'm absolutely certain that they were there about three minutes ago. D'you see that gully to the left of that patch of dark-brown scrub, quite close to the water?"

"Yes."

"Well, follow it along to the left until you come to a whitish-looking boulder."

"Yes, I've got it."

"Well, close by it I saw one man with a rifle. I spotted him through the telescope. About fifty yards to the right of the boulder there is a dip in the ground—you can't see it from here—but I saw the first chap wave to somebody, and seven more came running across the open space towards him."

"What on earth's become of them now, then?" asked Billy incredulously.

Roger noticed the doubtful tone in his friend's voice. "I'm absolutely positive they were there!" he reiterated. "I distinctly saw them run across. There were eight all told, and they all lay on the ground talking to each other. I saw them pointing in this direction. I couldn't possibly have made a mistake; I was watching through the telescope."

Billy's doubts were satisfied. "They're evidently hidden behind the boulders," he remarked apprehensively. "I wish to goodness they would show themselves. I hate to think they're there, and that we can't see them."

Just at that moment Ah Sing came running across from the opposite side of the summit. "Pilate makee come!" he exclaimed. "B'long one, two, three—b'long fourteen piecee, massa. My makee count!"

"Yes, he's quite right," Roger corroborated; "I saw them myself. Quite close to the wood where the alarm guns are."

Billy's face fell, for there was no doubt that the hill was about to be attacked on both sides, and leaving the other boy close by the water casks to look out for any further signs of the enemy on the southern slope, he accompanied Ah Sing to the breastwork on the other end of the plateau. But here too the enemy had effectually concealed themselves, for there were no signs of them anywhere, and hoping again that Ah Sing had made a mistake, the boy questioned him closely. But the Chinaman was positive he had counted fourteen men, and Billy was forced to admit to himself that his worst fears were realized. He could not afford to doubt the assertion of two independent witnesses.

The question now was what to do when the attack took place. He felt that if all the pirates had made up their

minds to attack from the same direction there might be some chance of repelling them, but now that they had elected to divide their forces, he dreaded to think of the consequences. The situation seemed hopeless; absolutely hopeless. A division of the attackers meant a similar division of the defenders, and if Ah Sing and himself undertook to be responsible for the attack from the north, how could Roger possibly cope with the eight men from the south?

Though tolerably certain of hitting at close ranges, Roger was by no means a good shot, and how could he drive off the attack of eight desperate men who knew how to take advantage of every scrap of cover. Billy felt sick at the thought, and with a fearful foreboding in his heart walked across to where Roger was and flung himself down on the ground beside him.

"Seen any more?" he queried anxiously.

"No," said Roger shaking his head. "Did you see the other lot to the northward?"

"Not a sign," Billy said sadly. "But Ah Sing was quite certain he counted fourteen. They're probably hiding like the lot this side."

"I say, Bill," murmured Roger apprehensively, "things are looking pretty bad. What d'you think we'd better do?"

"You must take this side of the hill, and Ah Sing and I'll look out for the other."

"But I can never stop them," Roger protested. "I counted eight, and they all seem to have rifles!"

"I'll come this side, and you can go with Ah Sing, if you like?"

"No, I didn't mean I felt in a funk exactly, but I don't see how one chap, however good a shot he was, could stop eight of them."

Billy did not know either, and for some seconds they

both gazed at each other sadly, hardly knowing what to say.

"It's awful," said Billy at last, with a suspicious quaver in his voice, standing up and looking round the horizon in the vain hope of sighting something. "I wonder——" he paused.

"What?"

"I wonder if that sailing ship told anyone we were here?"

Roger looked glum. "She may have," he said; "but unless some ship comes along almost at once it'll be too late. How long d'you think we can last out?"

"Not much more than a day. We haven't got much ammunition, but the water's the most serious business. If only it would rain."

Roger shrugged his shoulders, for rain had so often been wished for.

"I say, Bill," he said at last, "how would it do to make a bolt for the cave?"

Billy thought for a minute. "We shouldn't be much better off if we reached it," he said at last. "We could probably stop them getting in after us, but there's no water down there, and we couldn't take very much ammunition with us if we were making a bolt for it. Besides, they'd probably spot us on the way."

"What about getting to the stream, then," the other suggested. "There's water there?"

"That would be just as risky; we'd have to scramble down the precipice somehow. That rope of ours won't reach the bottom by a long way."

"But you said this afternoon we might have to do it."

"I know I did, but still I don't quite see how it's possible," Billy was forced to admit.

"Well, there's nothing for it but to fight it out or——" he hesitated.

"Or what?" Billy demanded.

"Surrender," Roger said.

"My dear chap," answered Billy, "it's no earthly good our talking about that. What d'you think would happen if we did? Why, they would simply gloat over the idea of having got hold of us without any further trouble; they'd kill us offhand. Don't you remember when we were caught the first time. What would have happened then if it hadn't been for Ah Sing? No, I believe they're simply attacking us out of pure revenge because we've knocked over a good many of them."

"Perhaps they think we've got some more treasure up here," Roger suggested.

"Perhaps they do," Billy replied; "but whatever they're doing it for doesn't make much difference to us. All we can do is to fight it out; go on fighting till the very last." The words sounded very heroic, and though the boy meant what he said, he felt miserably frightened.

"What I don't like," said Roger sadly, "is that they're probably going to attack us after dark. I shouldn't mind it so much during daylight, but at night. Ugh!"

"Yes, they are evidently going to rush the hill and surprise us after sunset; they don't know that we've already spotted them, you see," he added ruefully; "they are quite cute enough to know that we can't see to shoot in the dark."

Sunset was rapidly approaching, and already the sky was suffused with the rosy flush of the dying day. The evening seemed very still, nothing disturbing the silence except the flapping of the Red Ensign on its staff as it fluttered in the breeze; but though the boys and Ah Sing had maintained a sharp lookout on the enemy's positions, the latter had so far exhibited no signs of further movement.

"I'm getting sick of this," Billy suddenly said in an

irritated voice, for the inaction, combined with the knowledge that the pirates were biding their time in concealment, was beginning to get on his nerves. "I can't stand this beastly suspense any longer. I'm going to see if I can't make them show themselves." He reached across for his rifle.

"What are you going to do?" asked Roger.

"Fire a shot in their direction," said Billy, looking at the sights of his weapon. "Now whereabouts was it you saw your eight men?"

"Down there by the white boulder," replied the other, pointing down the slope.

"All right! Will you look at the boulder through the telescope, and see if you can spot whereabouts my bullet goes. I'm sighting for two thousand six hundred yards and shall aim straight at it."

Roger took the telescope and focused it on the place indicated. "All right!" he said an instant later, "I'm all ready."

Billy settled himself into a comfortable position, and using the aperture sight at the side of his weapon, levelled it full on the boulder far away below him. He waited for an instant holding his breath, and then, when the rifle was steady, pressed the trigger. The sharp report rang out abruptly, and laying down the weapon he gazed anxiously down the hill to see the result of his shot.

"Did you see it hit?" he queried.

"No," said Roger, looking through the glass. "Not a sign of it. I'm blowed—— Hallo, though!" he suddenly broke off, "there's something moving by that bush about ten yards to the left. There, a man's just shoved his head out. I can see his rifle; your shot's evidently disturbed him."

"So much the better," remarked Billy, reaching for his rifle again. "Let's have the glass for a minute."

Roger handed it across, and after a prolonged scrutiny Billy saw the bush the other boy had pointed out. "There's something there," he announced at length, "but you must have pretty good eyesight to make out a man's head. Watch while I fire at the bush," he added, returning the telescope.

He levelled the rifle and fired again, and this time Roger saw the bullet flick up a spurt of dust some distance short of its target. The man behind the bush evidently thought it time to move, for his figure suddenly became outlined against the background of sea, and then, running a short distance to the left, disappeared behind the more substantial cover of a boulder.

"He knows he was being fired at," said Roger, almost cheerfully. "He ran like a redshank. I wonder how many more—"

But his sentence was never finished, for at that moment a rifle barked far down the hill, and a missile struck up a little fountain of sand about halfway up the slope.

"Rotten shot!" laughed Billy derisively. "If you can't shoot better than that you'd better go and teach your grandmother to suck eggs—— Hallo! What's that?" he suddenly added, for he heard Ah Sing shouting behind him.

"Something's up!" said Roger.

"Well, I'd better go across and have a look," said Billy. "You'd better stay here, old chap, but whatever you do don't fire until you've a decent chance of hitting. Good-bye, Roger!" he added, holding out his hand and feeling a peculiar sickly sensation in his heart. "If anything happens we may never see each other again."

Roger gulped down the tears which would start to his eyes, and squeezed his friend's hand, but it was some moments before he could trust himself to speak. "Good-bye, old man!" he faltered at last; "I'm afraid I've been rather a beast sometimes, but I hope——"

"Oh, rot!" Billy exclaimed with forced cheerfulness; "don't worry about that. Keep your pecker up, we may come out all right yet. Well, so long, I must trot off, Ah Sing's yelling blue murder!" He stopped to pat his friend on the shoulder, and then ran off to join the Chinaman, who was looking through one of the loopholes commanding the northern slope, and just as the boy reached the breastwork a ragged sputter of musketry broke out from the enemy's position far down the hill.

The Chinese had evidently been tempted into firing by hearing the sound of Billy's two shots discharged at the enemy on the opposite side; but whatever their motive, their fusillade was perfectly harmless, for no bullets came anywhere near the summit. Neither Billy nor Ah Sing attempted to reply to the senseless expenditure of ammunition; cartridges were too precious, and as the pirates were a long distance off, and were well concealed behind the boulders, good shooting was impossible. The two of them, therefore, contented themselves with keeping a sharp lookout for further signs of movement on the part of the attackers, the popping of whose rifles soon ceased.

Ten minutes later the sun touched the horizon, and at the same instant a blue-clad figure leapt into view far down the hill and began to run up the slope, rifle in hand. Events were taking place exactly as Billy had thought they would, and the setting of the sun was evidently the prearranged signal for the assault to commence, for hardly had the first man appeared when several more bobbed up from behind their boulders and began the ascent.

They went in some fear of rifle fire from the summit, in spite of the long range, for they came on one by one, until, after covering about a hundred yards, they bobbed down behind cover again. But they had repented of their former hastiness in opening fire, for not a shot was discharged.

The sun had almost vanished, and as the upper rounded

edge of the great orb seemed to hesitate on the clear-cut horizon before finally disappearing for the night, Roger's rifle went off from the opposite edge of the plateau. His shot evoked an answering sputter from the pirates to the southward, but before very long, as the darkness began to fall, everything became still, and the hostile advance recommenced.

There was something uncanny and horrible in the way the Chinese came on without firing. Billy knew well enough that they wished to get to close quarters; but the sight of their running figures far down the slope, coming nearer and nearer each time they came into view, rather unnerved him. He was not exactly frightened; the first shot had roused the fighting instinct in his heart and had banished fear from his mind, but he felt helpless and powerless to check the advance of the cut-throat ruffians who were thirsting for his blood, for at present they were still outside effective range.

Close quarters! That was what he dreaded. He knew well enough that in another quarter of an hour it would be too dark to see to shoot, and he dreaded to think of what would happen when the enemy made their final assault. He felt a mad longing to rush down the hill and end it then and there. He would have done it, regardless of the risk, if he had been alone, but the thought of his two companions in distress restrained him. A desire to do something desperate nearly overmastered him; but he had to be content to lie there looking through his loophole, when all the time the enemy were drawing nearer and nearer, but so slowly that it seemed as if they would never come within effective range.

At last, when the short twilight had set in, and the familiar outlines of the island were becoming blurred and indistinct in the gathering gloom, Billy saw one of the pirates drop down behind a boulder close by the bamboo,

with its ragged wisp of canvas marking the distance of eight hundred yards from the summit. He adjusted the sights of his weapon, took careful aim, and waited for the man to rise, and a second or two later a head slowly came into view; then came a body, and as the pirate prepared to run forward again Billy pressed his trigger.

In the dim half-light it was wellnigh impossible to see the result of the shot, but the figure vanished at once, and at first Billy thought he had succeeded in hitting him. He was mistaken, however, for an instant later he saw the flash of his enemy's weapon, and the first bullet came whistling overhead. More men now came rushing up the hill towards where their companion lay, and aiming into the middle of them Billy fired again, Ah Sing following his example. The missiles evidently went somewhere near their target, for the pirates dropped to the ground and took cover, and before long had opened fire.

The flashes of their rifles danced in and out of the boulders like fireflies in the dusk, and this time, at any rate, they had gauged the distance fairly accurately, for their bullets began to drone through the air overhead, while several more, falling short, drove up showers of dust and stones.

Roger, on the opposite edge of the plateau, was now firing incessantly, but Billy was too intent on the business in hand to look round to see what was happening behind him. He gazed through his loophole at the darkening hillside in front, firing whenever he saw a sign of an enemy; but even now it was too dark for accurate aiming, while a slight mist rising off the ground made it impossible for him to see where his shots were falling. Presently, when the night fell and the afterglow of the sunset faded from the western sky, the firing died away as if an armistice had been proclaimed.

An armistice! Billy well knew what the next phase of

the fight would be, and withdrawing his rifle from its loop-hole he recharged the magazine and slipped the sight down to zero. He warned Ah Sing to do the same, and rising to his knees balanced his weapon on the top of the parapet and listened intently.

Every little puff of wind stirring the foliage of the trees down in the valley below brought a flutter to his heart. The dark shapes of the nearer boulders filled him with anxiety as he strained his eyes in his endeavours to pierce the gloom, and during this awful time he found himself longing for the final rush. The very fact of having to kneel there doing nothing, with the full knowledge that the pirates were creeping silently up the slope—creeping stealthily up and up, nearer and nearer—brought the waves of terror surging to his heart. During daylight he had felt no fear, but now that the darkness had fallen he felt miserably frightened. He experienced the awful sensations of a blind man trying to ward off the desperate attack of invisible enemies.

How long he knelt there watching he never knew, but suddenly he was brought to his senses by a peculiar metallic tinkle coming from the direction of the cove.

“Ding—ding.”

He looked anxiously seaward to see what had caused it, but the gathering mist quite obliterated the lower slopes of the island. “What was that?” he whispered to Ah Sing nervously.

“My no savvy, massa,” replied the Chinaman. “No savvy; plaps—”

But he never finished his sentence, for just at that moment Billy saw something moving about a hundred yards down the slope. He levelled his rifle in the direction and fired, and the sharp report was followed by a chorus of bloodcurdling yells from quite close at hand.

The final attack was about to take place.

Spurts of flame broke out from the darkness a short distance down the hillside. Bullets whistled overhead and splintered themselves against the boulders; the air seemed full of flying lead, but now was no time for taking cover, and, kneeling with their rifles balanced on the parapet, Billy and Ah Sing emptied the magazines in the direction of the hostile flashes.

"Bang bang—bang bang bang" went the weapons on both sides.

The firing had developed into a continuous rattle of sound. The noise was earsplitting, but though a sudden squeal of pain from the direction of the enemy showed that one of them had been hit, neither of the defenders were touched. Discarding his emptied weapon Billy seized a fresh rifle and worked the bolt with feverish haste. The actions of loading and firing, loading and firing, became almost mechanical. But nothing could stop the gradual advance of the enemy; the defenders were outnumbered by more than six to one, and the creeping shadows and the red flashes of the hostile weapons were getting nearer and nearer.

Seventy yards—fifty yards—thirty yards.

Closer and closer they came. Billy could have screamed aloud in his excitement; but still they came on—nothing would stop them.

Twenty yards—fifteen yards.

There was no time to reload, and Ah Sing dropped his emptied weapon with a grunt, and standing up seized his captured sword, while Billy took his useless rifle by the muzzle and waited for the final rush.

He would sell his life dearly, whatever happened.

Ah Sing's nerves were on edge; he could stand the strain no longer, and as the first dark figure shambled to its feet to run the last few yards he leapt over the breastwork and dashed on the enemy. His sword fell with a thud, and

the first man collapsed; but another pirate was now making a rush for Billy. The boy saw him coming, and then, when his assailant was within reach, brought his clubbed weapon down with all his strength. The pirate fell with a squeal of pain, and Billy poised his rifle for another blow.

Ah Sing's sudden onslaught seemed to have disconcerted the attackers, for no other men reached the summit, and all Billy could see was a struggling maelstrom of dark figures a short distance down the hill. He heard the thudding of weapons, mingled with wild yells and guttural exclamations, and then made up his mind to go to Ah Sing's assistance. Jumping the breastwork he began to run down the slope, but before he had gone three paces something happened.

A brilliant beam of light flickered out from the mist out at sea and fell full on the junk in the cove. Billy stopped dead, and watched it in amazement. He was hardly able to believe his eyes, but the powerful ray travelled slowly upwards until the summit of the hill was bathed in its dazzling glare.

The superstitious Chinese, unnerved by this new phenomenon, hesitated, and then fled in terror down the hill, while Billy, with unspeakable joy in his heart, suddenly sat down on the hillside and burst into tears—tears of thankfulness.

“A ship, a ship!” he heard himself saying incoherently.

Just at that moment Ah Sing came up with his sword still in his hand. The blade was blunt and jagged, and dripped horribly.

“My tink man-o'-war have come, massa,” he remarked in his expressionless voice. “Dat b'long sarchlight, my savvy.”

Billy looked at him and burst into a cackle of inane laughter, with the tears still streaming down his face.

But where was Roger?

CHAPTER XXIII

H.M.S "Daphne"

"LAND right ahead, sir!" came the singsong hail of the lookout in the foretop of His Majesty's light cruiser *Daphne*.

The lieutenant on watch stopped walking up and down the little bridge, and focused his telescope on the horizon dead ahead, but as he was considerably lower than the seaman perched up aloft, nothing as yet had appeared over the line where the sea ended and the sky began. Shutting up his glass with a snap he disappeared inside the charthouse to verify the truth of the lookout man's report.

"H'm!" he remarked to himself, looking at the chart with the ship's course marked upon it in pencil. "It's Endeavour Island right enough; there's no other land anywhere near."

He went out on to the bridge again and resumed his occupation of tramping up and down, until, about twenty minutes later, the dim purple shape of a distant peak began to show up against the pale sky on the horizon. He gazed at it for a moment, and then proceeded to the upper bridge to take its bearing with the standard compass, and having done this returned to the charthouse, and after glancing at the clock on the bulkhead scribbled something on a sheet of paper.

"7.30 p.m.," the legend ran. "Endeavour Island N. 82 W. (magnetic). Distance approximately 25 miles."

"Take this to the captain and navigating officer," he said, stepping outside and thrusting the folded paper into the hand of a bluejacket messenger. The seaman saluted, and retired down the ladder on his errand. Five minutes later the lieutenant (N)¹, followed by the captain, appeared on the bridge, and for some time both of them gazed at the gradually rising land ahead without speaking.

"That's Endeavour Island all right," remarked the captain at length. "I should recognize that peak anywhere. I've been past it several times before."

"It seems rather strange that those men are there, sir," put in the navigator. "I can't make head or tail of it. D'you think they were wrecked? The sailing directions distinctly say that the island's uninhabited."

"They must have been wrecked," answered the captain, "though we haven't heard of any ship having been lost. At any rate the skipper of that American barque—I can't remember her name—was quite positive that he saw someone waving a Red Ensign from the top of the hill as he passed. It was rather a pity the sea was too bad to let him lower a boat and take 'em off. It would have saved us this trip from Singapore."

"The yarn certainly sounds circumstantial enough, sir," said the lieutenant. "He wouldn't have said they were waving a Red Ensign if it was only imagination. But do you think there's any chance of the fellows having been taken off the island in the meanwhile?"

"Don't know. I hope not. I cabled to the Commander-in-Chief asking for permission to come here and see if there were any people ashore, and I don't expect he'll be particularly pleased if we've come on a wild-goose chase, and have wasted a good many tons of coal for nothing."

Two days before, some excitement had been caused at

¹ Lieutenant for navigating duties. Usually known in a man-of-war as the "navigator".

Singapore by the arrival of the American barque *Eliza B. Chalmers*, whose master reported that he had passed close to Endeavour Island, and that some shipwrecked people had evidently been cast ashore there. The state of the weather had not allowed him to lower a boat to investigate, but he stated that he had distinctly seen two men on the highest point of the island, and that one of them had been waving a Red Ensign. Hoping that they would be able to understand his signals, if by any chance they had a signal-book with them, he had hoisted flags to say, "Sea too bad for landing; will report you at Singapore", but he had no means of knowing whether or not his message had been taken in.

The *Daphne* had arrived at Singapore a week before the *Eliza B. Chalmers*, and on this information coming to the ears of the cruiser's commanding officer, Captain Donald John MacDonald, M.V.O., R.N., he had immediately cabled to the Commander-in-Chief at Hong-Kong, giving details of the American's story, and asking for instructions. The reply had been brief. "If satisfied with truth of information, proceed to Endeavour Island to investigate."

Captain MacDonald was satisfied, and the *Daphne* had sailed as soon as steam could be raised, and was now actually in sight of her destination.

"We shan't be up to the island before dark," observed the captain, turning to Hargreaves, the navigating officer.

"No, sir," agreed the latter, glancing at his watch and then at the reddening sky in the western horizon. "It's a quarter to eight now, and it's a good twenty miles off still."

"It'll take us about an hour and a quarter, then," replied the first speaker, making a mental calculation. "Say about nine o'clock. It'll be pitch dark by then."

Hargreaves agreed.

"Well, I'll go down and have some dinner," resumed the captain, turning to leave the bridge. "I'll be up again in half an hour, Darley!" he added, halting and addressing the officer of the watch.

"Sir?" said that lieutenant, saluting.

"Send down and tell the first lieutenant we shall not be anchoring on arrival, but warn him to have a cutter's crew ready to go away by nine o'clock."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"You'd better have a searchlight ready at the same time," the captain added as an afterthought, as he went down the ladder.

By sunset the dark-purple shape of Endeavour Island was sharply silhouetted against the evening sky, but half an hour later, when the tropical night had fallen, and the stars had begun to twinkle in the blue canopy overhead, the land could only be seen as a dark blurred patch against the lighter darkness of the horizon. There was no moon, and at times the mist wreaths stealing across the water all but shut out the view of the land. But still the *Daphne* steamed on, moving almost noiselessly over the calm sea.

Nine o'clock came; the sharp staccato notes of two bells rang out across the water, and at the same instant the coxswain of the starboard cutter arrived on the bridge to report his boat's crew correct to the officer of the watch.

"All right," said the captain, when the report had been passed on. "Warn 'em to stand by."

Ten minutes passed in silence, during which the officers on the bridge watched the dark shadow of the island getting nearer and nearer. There was a slight breeze blowing off the land, just sufficient to ruffle the water, but the mist was getting thicker. Captain MacDonald suddenly started. "Did you hear that, Hargreaves?" he asked abruptly.

"Hear what, sir?" asked the navigator. They both listened intently.

"There it goes again!" exclaimed the first speaker, as a peculiar "clip clop" was borne to their ears on the gentle breeze.

"Yes, sir, I heard that distinctly."

"There's only one thing makes a noise like that," announced the captain, "and that's a rifle. What's happening? Why on earth should they be firing rifles at this time of night?"

"Perhaps it's to attract our attention, sir," suggested the lieutenant, as the sound became audible again, though this time it was more insistent.

"Clip clop. Clip clop. Burrrp! Burrrp! Burrrp!" it went.

"H'm!" muttered the captain uneasily. "They may be trying to attract our attention, as you suggest, but if they are there are about twenty of 'em firing rifles at once. That American only mentioned two, didn't he? I wonder——"

"We're getting close, sir," interrupted the navigator, who had been gazing at the blurred shape of the island through his night glasses.

"All right! Stop both engines!"

The lieutenant whispered through the voice-pipe to the men at the engine-room telegraphs on the bridge, the bells rang, and the cruiser's way through the water gradually decreased.

"Half speed astern both!" came the next order.

The twin propellers drove the water into foam as they reversed, and in a minute the *Daphne* was floating motionless on the water.

"Switch on a searchlight!" came the voice of the captain from the bridge.

The seaman attending the light moved a lever, and the

blinding blue-white ray of the powerful light shot out in a dazzling beam, completely dispelling the haze in its vicinity. It swept slowly to and fro across the water, and then rested on a junk anchored in a little cove fringed with palms. Remaining stationary for an instant, it then swept sideways and upwards until it shone full on the summit of the hill.

The cruiser was fully two miles distant, but in spite of the mist every stone and every bush on the hillside was clearly visible in the blinding glare. Captain Mac-Donald levelled his binoculars on the spot, but a moment later put them down with a sudden exclamation.

"The place is alive with men!" he said excitedly. "I believe the Chinese from that junk we saw are attacking the people on the hill. That would account for the firing we heard. First lieutenant!"

"Sir?"

"Great Scott! Listen to 'em yelling!" broke off the captain, as a chorus of wild shouts came from the hilltop. "First lieutenant!"

"Sir?" said that officer again.

"Send the cutter away in charge of an officer, and see that the boat's crew have their rifles. Get her away as soon as you can. Send the officer to me for orders."

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered the first lieutenant, dashing down the ladder.

Two minutes later Darley, breathless with haste and armed with a sword and revolver, clambered up on to the bridge and reported himself to the captain.

"Are you going away in the cutter?" asked the latter.

"Yes, sir."

"All right! Get away as soon as you can, and pull for the shore; I'll put a searchlight on the place where you are to land. When you get there land your men, and take 'em up that hill as fast as you can."

Darley's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Am I to—"

"There's no time for talking," interrupted the captain. "I believe the Chinese from that junk are attacking the people on the hill, but don't use your rifles unless it's absolutely necessary. If there is a fight going on you'd better burn a blue light to let us know; there's one in the boat. Now, d'you quite understand what you've got to do?"

"Yes, sir," said the lieutenant.

"All right, away you go then. Be as quick as you can."

Running down the ladder Darley clambered into the boat, and a minute later the falls were creaking as she was lowered, until she finally fell into the water with a little splash.

The bluejackets needed no bidding to exert themselves, for they knew something was amiss and were spoiling for a fight, and the oars bent like fishing-rods as the blades whipped the water into foam.

Another searchlight flashed out from the man-of-war and rested on the shore of the little cove towards which the cutter was pulling, and at the same time Captain MacDonald took another look at the hilltop through his glasses. The crowd he had seen there a few minutes before had vanished, but on the searchlight being moved down the slope fully twenty men could be seen running down the hill for all they were worth.

"Our cutter will catch that little lot if they have been up to mischief!" exclaimed the captain, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "They're evidently making for the junk."

"Perhaps they're the shipwrecked people coming down to the beach, sir," suggested the first lieutenant, who was standing alongside his commanding officer.

"I hope not," ejaculated the skipper, for he dearly loved the idea of a fight.

The first lieutenant laughed.

"No, I hope not," the other continued, wrinkling his brow, "but the whole thing's very mysterious. Look here, Carruthers!"

"Sir?"

"Get a gun's crew closed up round one of the foremost four-inch guns, and load it with common shell; we may want it. Between you and me, and the gatepost, I believe something rather serious has been happening."

CHAPTER XXIV

Saved

BILLY was so overcome with emotion that he could hardly bring himself to realize that the attack was really over and the danger past. He was overwrought; the strain of the last few days and the wound in his head had had their effect, and it was fully a minute before his brain was working clearly. But when he did recover he was suddenly struck by the thought that he had not seen Roger. Where was he?

He looked round, half expecting to see his friend standing behind him, but there was no sign of him. Something must have happened; something serious, for surely the brilliant glare of the searchlight would have brought the other boy running to the spot if all had been well. Seriously alarmed, Billy jumped to his feet to search for his companion, while Ah Sing, guessing what was in his mind, accompanied him. They ran across the plateau to look at the spot where Roger had been firing at the pirates attacking from the south. He was not there, though an empty rifle lay on the ground close beside the boulder behind which he had been lying.

“He had two rifles, hadn’t he, Ah Sing?” Billy queried anxiously, for he was possessed by the terrible thought that perhaps the Chinese had made Roger a prisoner and taken him down the hill.

“Two piecee haf got,” Ah Sing corroborated.

With a fearful foreboding in his heart Billy ran into the tent, thinking that perhaps Roger had been wounded and had gone in to lie down, but again he was not there.

The hilltop, by this time, was no longer illuminated by the ray of the searchlight, and though the darkness made it very difficult to see, Billy and Ah Sing went over the ground foot by foot. They investigated every possible nook and cranny; they felt over every inch of the ground, but the result of their close scrutiny only corroborated Billy's worst fears. Roger was nowhere in Hill Fort.

Followed by the faithful Chinaman Billy then began to move down the southern slope of the hill, stopping every now and then to call aloud for his friend. But no answer came to his cries, and half beside himself with anxiety he continued his search. It was very dark, and though the hillside itself was visible, the blurred patches of dark shadow thrown by the boulders made a thorough search practically impossible.

In five minutes they had left the summit fifty yards behind, but still there were no signs of the missing lad. Billy, by this time, felt practically certain that his friend had been kidnapped by the enemy, and he was just about to suggest a return to the hilltop, with the idea of following in the footsteps of the retreating pirates and making an effort to rescue him, when the searchlight once more fell on Hill Fort. They were, so to speak, under the lee of the summit, and therefore not in the direct ray of the dazzling beam, but still the glare was sufficiently intense to shed a sort of luminous mist over the ground on which they were standing.

Thankful for the opportunity they resumed the search, and it was not long before Ah Sing, who was examining the ground about twenty feet from Billy, gave vent to a sudden exclamation.

The boy, surmising that the Chinaman had found some-

thing, began to run towards him, but hardly had he started when a dark figure rose to its knees under Ah Sing's feet. It was one of the pirates who had been wounded, for an instant later Billy saw the flash of a knife as the man made a wild upward slash with his blade. Ah Sing saw it coming, and leapt aside with a shout, and dropping his rifle flung himself upon his enemy before he could stab again. The pirate was forced backwards with his adversary on top of him; the knife left his grasp and tinkled on the ground, and in a second the two men were fighting like wild cats. Neither had any weapons except their bare hands, but each endeavoured to seize the other by the throat, and for nearly half a minute the terrible struggle went on without appreciable advantage to either side. The man underneath made frenzied efforts to dislodge his assailant sprawling across his chest, but he had no chance from the outset. Ah Sing had gained the initial advantage, and weakened as his opponent was, it was not long before he had seized the miserable wretch by the throat, and was slowly throttling the life out of him.

Billy, sickened at the sight, turned his head away, but when he did look round the pirate was motionless on the ground, and Ah Sing was rising to his feet muttering something in his own language. Slipping a cartridge into his rifle, for he did not wish to be caught napping if any more wounded men were in the neighbourhood, the boy resumed his search for Roger, and at last, when he had gone on a short distance down the hill, and had almost given up the task as hopeless, he heard himself being called by name.

"Bill! Bill, old chap!" came a feeble voice.

"Here I am, Roger!" Billy answered thankfully.
"Where are you?"

"About ten yards in front. I can see you against the glare coming over the hill."

Billy dashed on down the slope, and there, sure enough, was Roger lying flat on the ground close beside an enormous boulder.

"Thank heaven you've come!" he said wearily. "I've been watching you walking about the hill for nearly ten minutes and have been calling out to you the whole time!"

Billy sat down and pillow'd his friend's head on his knees. "Are you badly wounded?" he asked, when he had made him comfortable.

"I got hit through the right shoulder," Roger explained. "It hurts like fury!"

"Poor old chap," answered Billy in a sympathetic voice. "Buck up, though. A ship has come, and the pirates have all run away!"

"Run away!" Roger echoed in amazement. "D'you mean everything's all right, and that a ship has come?" His voice quivered with anxiety, for he could hardly bring himself to believe the welcome news.

"Yes," repeated Billy joyfully. "It's all over. A ship has come; that's her searchlight you can see shining over the hill."

"Thank goodness! Thank goodness!" was all the other could say, while the tears of thankfulness ran down his face.

At that moment Ah Sing came trotting up, and with Billy's assistance the wounded boy was hoisted on to his strong shoulders, and they started back for Hill Fort. They reached the summit without difficulty and laid Roger on the ground close to the tent, and after Billy had moistened his lips with some of the precious water, he went into the tent to search for something to bandage the wounded shoulder. The brilliant ray of the searchlight bathed the hilltop in a glare as bright as daylight, and returning with some rags torn from a shirt, Billy set to work to do what he could for his stricken friend. The

wound was a nasty one, for the bullet had gone right through the shoulder, but Roger bore it manfully, and though he gritted his teeth with pain as Billy washed away the blood, he did not utter a sound.

"There, that's all shipshape," said Billy at last, having put pads of moistened linen on the punctures and wrapping a rough bandage round the shoulder. "That'll do until we can get a doctor to have a look at you. Does it hurt much?"

"No," said Roger, lying manfully, for the pain was excruciating. "Not very much. Hallo, what's that?" he suddenly broke off, as a rattle of musketry broke out from the direction of the wood by the cove.

"The fellows from the ship are—— By George, listen to that!" Billy exclaimed excitedly, as the unmistakable sound of a British cheer came from the same direction as the shots. "Listen to 'em cheering!"

The searchlight suddenly left the hill, and once more they were left blinking in almost total darkness.

"I say, old chap," said Roger wistfully. "You might take me across to the other side, we mustn't miss this. I wonder what's happening?"

Billy and Ah Sing between them carried the wounded lad across to the opposite side of the plateau and sat him down on the hillside with his back against the breastwork. From here he could obtain an unrestricted view of the cove, and having made him comfortable, all three of them watched the final act of the drama which was now being played before their eyes.

Something certainly was happening.

The cove was illuminated in the blinding glare of two searchlights, while stealing out to sea across the calm water, with her brown sails filling out in the night breeze, was the junk. The white beach itself was dotted with dark figures who seemed to be running about in hopeless

confusion, but every now and then the flash of a rifle, and the sound of a sharp report, showed that the fight was still in progress.

Some of the pirates had evidently reached the junk, and had sailed off leaving their friends to fend for themselves, and these, with the obstinacy of hopeless despair, and knowing full well that there was no hope for them, were offering a desperate resistance.

But it could not last for very long, and presently all firing ceased, and once more the sound of British cheers from many lusty throats rang out through the night air, and brought the joy surging to the boys' hearts.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Billy, overcome by the magnetism of the shouting, leapt to his feet and began excitedly to wave his arms. He hardly knew what he was doing in his frantic joy, and for a few seconds he capered about, adding his shouts to the volleying cheers from below. But a brilliant red flash from the dark shape of the ship out at sea suddenly made him look in her direction.

"Boom!" went the shattering report of a heavy gun, the deep echo reverberating over the island.

A column of spray leapt into the air at the side of the flying junk, now nearly a mile off the land, and a four-inch shell went screaming into the darkness with a savage whine.

"Boom!" went the weapon again.

This time the projectile sped true and caught the junk full amidships. The watchers on the hill heard a loud crash; they caught a fleeting glimpse of a brilliant flash and a cloud of smoke eddying through the beam of the searchlight, and then a mass of debris seemed to fly skywards through the pall. It was some moments before the air cleared, but when it did, it could be seen that the junk was done for. The explosion of the shell had almost cut her in two; two of her masts had vanished; and even now

her bows were almost level with the water. The end came quickly, for as they watched, the towering stern suddenly reared itself perpendicularly out of water. It hung for an instant, pointing skywards, and then, as the imprisoned air escaped, began slowly to disappear. In a minute it was all over, for with a sickening rush the ill-fated craft slid from view, and all that remained to tell of her former presence was a mass of splintered debris floating on the surface.

"She's gone!" Roger gasped breathlessly.

"And so's our treasure," put in Billy.

Roger gave a feeble chuckle. "Treasure!" he said. "I don't care twopence if it has!"

"Nor do I, as a matter of fact," replied Billy, though in his heart he could not help feeling rather sorry that his dreams of being rich for life had dissolved into thin air. But he shrugged his shoulders, for after all, he thought to himself, what did the loss of the treasure signify so long as their lives were saved? If he had been the possessor of all the riches of the world he would willingly have bartered them to get the Chinese clear of the island.

But Ah Sing suddenly burst in upon his thoughts. "Piecee man makee come topside," he suddenly remarked, cocking his head on one side and listening intently.

Billy pricked up his ears and distinctly heard the sound of advancing footsteps and the low murmur of conversation a short distance down the hill. As yet he could see nothing, and for an instant began to think that the pirates were coming again, but soon afterwards his doubts were set at rest.

"'Ere, Pincher"¹ suddenly complained a deep voice, "cawn't yer knock orf stickin' the muzzle of yer bloomin' muskit in the small o' me back. Wot with these 'ere

¹ In the Royal Navy all men whose surnames are "Martin" are nicknamed "Pincher".

boulders, an' you be'ind a-joggin' me in the starn, I cawn't do nothing. It's as dark as——" But the speaker never concluded his sentence, for at that moment there came a loud thud as he lost his balance and sat down abruptly.

A titter of laughter broke out from the darkness.

"Oh, lor'!" a man sniggered, "'ere's old Tubby bin an' sat down agen——"

"Who's there?" Billy cried.

"It's us, some of th' *Daphne's*," answered a voice. "We're comin' along ter find some blokes wot 'as bin shipwrecked. 'Ave you bin shipwrecked?"

"I should jolly well think we have," replied Billy, starting down the hill towards his rescuers. "We've been fighting Chinese pirates for goodness knows how long, and if your ship hadn't come along we should have been killed."

"Lor' lumme," ejaculated the man on the ground, "that's th' little lot we met on th' beach. Pretty little show it was too. Is there any more of you up there?"

The boy came upon the little group of three bluejackets. They were all breathing heavily after their stiff climb, while one burly individual was still sitting on the ground nursing a badly barked shin. "Look 'ere, mister bloomin' shipwrecked sailor," he grumbled, "I don't mind a-rescuin' you, an' I reckon I likes 'avin' a rub with pirls, but I didn't join th' bloomin' Navy to come climbin' abart these 'ere boulderous 'ills at my time of——"

"Stow it, Tubby," interrupted one of the other men. "You've allus got a grievance. This bloke's bin shipwrecked. I 'specs 'e's 'ungry."

Billy gave a chuckle, for he was really rather amused at the way in which these strange sailors were behaving themselves.

But the man on the ground was slowly rising to his feet. "It's orl right for you to talk, Pincher," he remarked; "but if you'd tore yer breeches the same as I 'ave you'd

'ave a grievance. Come on, mister," he added, addressing Billy, "let's 'ave a look at yer pals."

Billy led them up the hill without mishap and introduced them to his companions.

"S'welp me," remarked one of the sailors, examining Ah Sing closely, "one of 'em's a bloomin' Chink!"

"He's all right," Billy explained. "If it hadn't been for him we should have been dead ages ago."

"Oo's t'other one?" demanded the seaman, peering down at Roger.

"He's been wounded. Hit through the shoulder with a bullet."

The man whistled softly. "Seems just as well we did come along," he remarked. "Look 'ere, mister," he went on to say, for he was evidently the leader of the little party, "if there's no more of yer to be rescued, we'd best be gettin' back to our pals agen. The orficer in charge said we was to go down and report if we found anything. I can carry th' wounded bloke down in me arms."

"Right you are, then!" agreed Billy. "I think he'd better see a doctor as soon as possible. I suppose your ship carries one. Eh?"

The seaman nodded, and without further ado bent down and lifted Roger up in his arms. The wounded boy, though not exactly unconscious, hardly realized what was going on around him. The excitement of the day, the pain of his wound, which was now throbbing abominably, and the spectacle of the junk being sunk had all had their effect, and his brain seemed to be crowded with strange thoughts. He felt as if he was dreaming, but still he knew he was safe, and made no protest when the burly sailor lifted him in his arms.

Before long the little party were descending the hill, and as they walked Billy gave his rescuers a brief résumé of what had taken place during their stay on the island.

"Lor' lumme!" the man who was carrying Roger remarked, "you've 'ad a proper doin' an' no mistake. It sounds like one o' these 'ere islands I've read abart, what wi' th' treasure an' th' pirls an' all."

"Yes, we have had rather a rotten time," Billy admitted, "and I'm jolly glad you came when you did. By the way, what is your ship?"

"The *Daphne*," the man answered, "a small cruiser. We came 'ere from Singapore, 'avin' 'eard from a sailing ship that someone 'ad bin seen 'ere. I'm glad we've found you orl rite. We'd a looked a silly lot o' kites if we 'adn't."

Going through the wood and scrambling down the short slope leading to the beach they soon came to the stream. Here, at Billy's suggestion, they halted for five minutes to quench their thirst, and when this had been done, continued their advance on to the beach, which was still illuminated in the glare of the searchlight. A group of sailors under the direction of a lieutenant were busy launching the cutter in which they had landed, while a little farther off six of the pirates, with their hands and feet tied, were sitting huddled together guarded by a bluejacket with a loaded rifle. Billy looked at their evil faces and felt sorry for them, for the miserable wretches knew full well what their fate would be.

The officer soon saw the party approaching and hurried to meet them.

"Hallo, you've found them, Martin!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, on the top of th' 'ill; two Englishmen and a Chinaman."

Billy came forward and introduced himself to the lieutenant.

"Great Scott!" remarked the latter in amazement, marvelling at the boy's youthful appearance, "are you the boss of this little party?"

Billy hesitated. "Hardly the boss," he said at last.

"There are three of us. Roger Wedderburn here, who's been wounded, Ah Sing"—he pushed the Chinaman forward as he spoke—"and myself, William Martin."

"Only three of you!" the officer repeated in a surprised voice. "Why, the place was alive with armed Chinamen. We had a pretty little rough and tumble on the beach when we landed, I can tell you. Two of my chaps were wounded, but we laid out most of the Chinese and took half a dozen prisoners. Look there!" He waved his hand towards the farther end of the beach, on which nearly a dozen motionless figures lay full in the ray of the searchlight.

"If you hadn't come along we should have been killed," Billy answered gratefully. "They attacked the hill three or four times, and we'd run out of water."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the other. "It beats me how you managed to keep 'em off for so long. By the way, what ship did you belong to?"

"The *Saracen*. We were wrecked on the reef out there."

"H'm, I see you've got a smack on the head too. But come on, though, you can tell us your yarn to-morrow. The cutter's afloat, and we'd better get back to the ship. I must report to the captain. Your friend looks as if he'd better see the doctor too."

Leaving the prisoners behind under the guard of two seamen the party took their places in the boat, and a quarter of an hour later they were alongside the cruiser.

On getting on board Roger, Billy, and the two seamen who had been wounded were taken to the sick bay to have their hurts dressed, while the lieutenant went up to the bridge to make his report to the captain.

Roger, as being the most seriously wounded, was attended to first, but the doctor's verdict was entirely satisfactory, for the bullet, though it had gone through the muscles of the shoulder, had mercifully missed the bone.

"You'll be all right again in a week or two, my boy," the kind-hearted staff surgeon remarked as he deftly replaced Billy's rough bandage with a proper dressing. "You'll have a couple of nice little scars, but beyond that you'll be as fit as a fiddle before long. Now we'll give you something to eat and a drop of something to make you sleep. You've not brought any pyjamas with you, I expect," he added with a grin, "so we'll send along for a suit of mine."

Roger, arrayed in the borrowed garments, was lifted into one of the swinging cots, and before very long had gone off into a deep sleep.

"Well, what's the matter with you, my lad?" asked the doctor as he cut away the bandage round Billy's head.

"It's only a graze," the boy answered.

"H'm, pretty nasty graze. You've lost a decent drop of blood, but it only wants washing and a bit of a bandage shoved round it. I don't think we need keep you on the sick list."

A neat-fingered sick-bay attendant cleaned and bandaged Billy's head, and just as this operation was over the captain came in and went across to him.

"Well, youngster," he said kindly, "I've been hearing all about you. It seems you've been having a pretty rotten time. What? no bones broken? Eh?"

"No, sir. I don't think either of us is very bad. You don't know, sir, how grateful we are that you came in time. If—"

"Don't worry about that, boy," interrupted Captain MacDonald with a cheery laugh. "Only too pleased to have been of assistance. How did your ship come to be wrecked?"

Billy explained, and went on to narrate what had happened during their stay on the island. The officer listened attentively to all the boy had to say. "It's a pity about that

treasure," he remarked at length when the story had been told. "I wouldn't have sunk that junk if I'd known. However, she's gone down in sixty fathoms; too deep to send a diver down to look for it.

"I intend remaining here till to-morrow," he continued, "and if the doctor'll let you you must come and show me over the island. When we've done that we sail for Singapore and you'll go home to England. You'll be looking forward to seeing your people again. What?"

"I haven't got any people, sir, I'm an orphan," Billy explained.

"An orphan! Poor chap! However, I dare say something'll turn up." The captain turned away, and after learning from the staff surgeon that the two sailors were not seriously wounded, left the sick bay and returned on deck.

Ah Sing, meanwhile, had made himself quite at home, for he had made friends with some of the Chinese servants on board the cruiser, the greater number of whom, he found to his delight, came from his own city, Canton.

The next morning after breakfast working parties were sent ashore to obliterate all traces of the recent battle and to bury the remains of the fallen pirates, and while this was being done Billy was showing Captain MacDonald and some other officers all over the island.

They went round in a boat and examined the cave; they climbed the hill and explored the fort; they investigated the ficus tree with its inscription; and lastly went over to the western side to look at the spot where the treasure chest had been buried. Billy had thought that perhaps the pirates might have left some of its contents behind, but not a vestige of anything remained. It had all been taken off to the junk, and only the gaping hole and the footsteps in the sand round about it showed what had happened.

"Well, Martin," said the captain, when at last their tour of investigation was finished and they were retracing their footsteps towards the beach. "It all sounds like a fairy tale, and if I hadn't seen this I don't think I should have been able to believe it all. But it baffles me how the three of you ever managed to get out of it alive."

"Yes, sir, it does seem rather wonderful, but if the *Daphne* hadn't arrived, we should have been dead by now."

"I'm glad I believed the yarn from that American sailing ship, then. Is there anything here you want to take home with you?"

"One or two things, sir."

"You'd better take a couple of men and collect what you want. I shall go on board now, and you can follow with the men when they've finished their work."

For an hour Billy and two sailors were on the hilltop putting things shipshape, and collecting the few things the boy wanted to take away. He selected a couple of the rifles, the tattered Red Ensign, the *Black Arrow*'s log, and one or two other small personal possessions belonging to Roger and himself, and then prepared to leave the hill.

He looked round at the traces of their occupation with a certain amount of sadness in his heart. He saw the bullet-splashed boulders, the splintered water casks, their tent, and many other things which at the time had seemed of such great importance, for the last time. He looked down the slope from which the attacks had come, and shutting his eyes tried to imagine that he and his companions were still alone on the island.

The little place had been a home to them, in spite of the vicissitudes and perils through which they had passed, and it possessed some subtle fascination which made him sorry to have to say goodbye to it for good and all. To tell the truth, he rather dreaded the idea of returning to England

and civilization. Here, on the island, he had been to some extent monarch of all he surveyed, and although he had never exercised his authority, he knew well enough that Roger and Ah Sing looked up to him as their leader. In England, though he longed to see his own country once more, the weary round of looking for employment would begin all over again. He would be one of thousands; he had not a penny in the world now that the treasure had gone, and having no friends or relations to whom he could apply for help, he would be forced to do something to keep body and soul together.

The future had a miserable prospect in store for him, and the more he considered it, the more he dreaded it.

But the two bluejackets, whose dinner-time was approaching, were waiting for him to move off, and shouldering his rifle, and with the *Black Arrow*'s log clutched in his disengaged hand, he gave one last look round the horizon, and left the summit.

They arrived on the beach in due course and found that all the *Saracen*'s stores which had not been looted by the Chinese had been stacked together and covered over with a tarpaulin. Billy had come to the conclusion that it was not worth while taking them away, and after consulting Captain MacDonald, had decided to leave them behind on the island where they might, perhaps, be of use if another ship was wrecked there.

All traces of the fight had been obliterated. The bodies of the slain had been buried in the sand close by Boulder Point, and white-painted crosses, manufactured on board by the cruiser's carpenters, had been erected over the graves of the drowned men of the *Saracen*.

Soon afterwards the party went off to the ship, and an hour later the *Daphne* steamed away for Singapore.

Roger, who had been carried on deck, Billy, and Ah Sing watched the familiar outline of the island as its blue shape

gradually disappeared. They all felt sorry to leave, and when at last the summit of Hill Fort sank below the horizon, Billy turned aside with a gulp in his throat.

"What's up, old chap?" Roger asked.

"I'm jolly sorry to see the last of it," Billy answered. "I don't know what I shall do when I get home. I haven't anyone I can go to, and——"

"Never mind, Bill. I've got my mother, and you needn't think she'll forget what you've done. If it hadn't been for you what would have happened to me?"

"Oh, rot! You're always dinning it into me that I've done something for you. You and Ah Sing have done just as much for me; in fact, Ah Sing's done a jolly good lot for both of us."

He turned and seized the Chinaman by the hand and wrung it hard. A smile flickered over Ah Sing's yellow face.

CHAPTER XXV

Conclusion

IN due course, and after an excellent passage, the *Daphne* arrived at Singapore, but as the staff surgeon insisted that it would be unwise to move Roger until his wounds had properly healed, both he and Billy remained on board the cruiser. During the short time they had been in the ship they had become very popular with the officers and men, and it was Captain MacDonald himself who had suggested to the doctor that Roger's wound should be made an excuse for keeping the boys on board until arrangements could be made for their passage home to England. Billy and Roger themselves were delighted at the prospect, for the life and routine on board a man-of-war was something entirely novel and strange to both of them, and the longer they were permitted to stop, the better they would like it. Roger, too, was soon well enough to walk about, though he had to keep his arm in a sling for the time being.

Ah Sing, thanks to Captain MacDonald's recommendation, was soon installed as a servant to an English family in the colony, and though at first he found his new situation rather trying, particularly after the free and easy life on board the junk, and latterly upon the island, he soon remembered what he had learnt in the same capacity at Hong-Kong, and gave his new master every satisfaction.

The story of the wreck of the *Saracen*, and garbled versions of what had taken place upon the island, leaked out,

and before long Billy and Roger found themselves enjoying rather an unenviable notoriety. Newspaper men would come off to the cruiser under all sorts of trumpery pretexts for the ulterior purpose of interviewing the two survivors; others begged to be allowed to take their photographs for publication, while the local newspapers printed all sorts of lurid and exaggerated details as to their gallant deeds. At first it had all been rather amusing, and the boys had laughed at the glaring headlines, but eventually things got to such a pass that they could not go ashore without being literally mobbed.

Captain MacDonald, meanwhile, had cabled to the Commander-in-Chief asking what should be done with the boys, and one morning, about a week after reaching Singapore, he sent for them.

"Well," he said, when they were both in his cabin. "I've just had a letter from Hong-Kong in answer to my cable about you. The Commander-in-Chief says that if you like you can both go home to England in the *Dorset*. She's a first-class cruiser, you know, and is leaving Hong-Kong to-morrow on her way home. She'll be here before the week's out. What d'you think about it?"

"I should like it far better than going in an ordinary ship, sir," Billy replied.

"And so would I, sir," echoed Roger.

"Well, that's all right. Now there's something else I wanted to talk to you about. What d'you both propose to do when you get home? You, Martin," he said, turning to Billy, "told me the other day that you were an orphan."

Billy hesitated. "I must look for work of some kind, sir," he said at last. "I haven't any friends or anyone at home I can go to."

"But what would you like to do, my boy?" the captain asked kindly. "I really can't let you go home in this off-hand sort of way."

"I should like to go to sea as an officer in the merchant service, sir, but I don't know how I can."

Captain Macdonald thought for a minute. "You're quite certain you want to go to sea, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. Sir Francis Holland, a cousin of mine, is the chairman of the Eastern Shipping Company; you know, those large yellow-funnelled steamers running to China and Japan. Last time I was in England he was telling me that they take apprentices and train them up as officers; how d'you think that would suit you?"

"Very well indeed, sir, but I should have to pay a premium, and I haven't got any——"

"Tut tut, boy! Don't let that worry you. Sir Francis Holland is my cousin, and if I write to him I'm certain he'll take you on without the money. It isn't as if you didn't know anything about the sea; from what I've seen of you I should say you know a pretty good deal. He'll be only too pleased to get hold of a promising lad."

"But there's the outfit, sir," Billy protested, "I——"

"Don't worry about the outfit!" exclaimed the captain good naturedly. "I'll pay that for you."

"But——"

"That's quite all right," said the captain, waving his hand to brush aside the boy's objection. "Consider it settled."

Billy's mouth opened wide, and he hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

"Well, what about you, Wedderburn?" the officer asked.

"I've got my mother at home, sir."

"Yes. But what are you going to do for a job. You can't hang round your mother all your life?"

"I think I'd like to go to sea with Billy, I mean Martin, sir," Roger stammered at last.

"The deuce you would! Well, I'll mention your name to Sir Francis as well. If you've changed your mind by the time you get home, there'll be no harm done."

"It's awfully kind of you, sir," Billy burst out, "and you don't know how grateful I am for all you've done for me."

"And me too, sir," echoed Roger.

"That's quite all right, so don't let it worry you. I'm only too glad to be able to do something. After all, what's the good of having a cousin the chairman of a line of steamers if I can't make use of him, what?" The captain gave a cheery laugh. "Now, then," he added, turning to his desk. "You must both run away, I've got a lot of writing to do."

They left the cabin together.

"I say, he is a ripper!" Billy exclaimed when he had shut the door behind him.

"I should think he jolly well was," Roger agreed.

Five days later saw the boys on board the *Dorset*. The great cruiser left the anchorage with the long paying-off pennant at her masthead and her band playing "Rolling Home", while her ship's company, and that of the *Daphne*, following the usual custom of the Royal Navy, crowded the rigging of their respective ships and cheered themselves hoarse. The departure of a man-of-war for home is always an affecting scene, and the boys found it doubly so, for though they had only been on board the *Daphne* for a short time, they had made many friends.

Captain MacDonald had called both of them into his cabin before they left, and had presented them each with a ten-pound note, for "pocket money on the way home", as he expressed it; and though they had protested vehemently against this further proof of his generosity, he flatly refused to let them leave with empty pockets.

But the most distressing scene of all had been when

Ah Sing arrived on board the *Dorset* to say goodbye about half an hour before she sailed. He had brought with him a parting present in the shape of a small parcel of horrible glutinous-looking native cakes, and for once in his life his feelings had got the better of him. Billy and Roger, too, had broken down completely, for they had both learned to love the man who had been so faithful to them, heathen Chinee as he was.

But the farewells were over at last, and with sadness in their hearts the boys watched the *Daphne* fading into the dim distance astern as the *Dorset* left the anchorage and steamed out into the Straits of Malacca.

For a few hours they felt strange and homeless in their new surroundings. They were accommodated in the gun-room, and the idea of having to be messmates with the sub-lieutenants, engineer sub-lieutenants, assistant pay-masters, and midshipmen rather alarmed them. But naval officers are not snobs, and instead of treating the boys as interlopers, as Billy had feared they would, they regarded them as honoured guests, and went out of their way to make them happy and comfortable. The midshipmen particularly, being of much the same age as themselves, never tired of bombarding them with questions as to their exploits on the island, and there was not the least doubt that all these young officers would gladly have bartered a year's pay to be able truthfully to say that they had undergone the same thrilling experiences. By the end of their first day on board, therefore, Billy and Roger had become quite accustomed to their new messmates, and by the time the cruiser arrived at Colombo, her first port of call, they found they had only lost one lot of friends in the *Daphne* to fall into equally congenial surroundings in the *Dorset*.

The passage home passed off without incident, and after touching at Aden, and passing through the Suez Canal to Port Said, the ship steamed into the Mediterranean and

on to Malta. From there she proceeded to Gibraltar, her final stopping-place before arriving in England, and it was here that the boys heard a wonderful piece of news.

It happened that the *Dorset* had to take in coal, and while this tedious operation was in progress, Billy and Roger, accompanied by some of the midshipmen, went ashore for a few hours.

Neither of them had visited "the Rock" before, and for some time their guides were indefatigable in conducting them round the various objects of interest. But midshipmen, like other boys, are only human, and as the day was very hot, it was not long before they began to feel hungry and thirsty.

"I say, you chaps," suggested one of them, Marston by name, "I think it would be a jolly good idea if we had an ice or two."

"My dear fellow," replied one of the others glumly, "it's close on the end of the month, and I've only got ninepence to my name!"

Marston laughed. "That's all right," he said. "The mail came in this morning, and my governor sent me a fiver." He took an envelope from his pocket as he spoke, and displayed a crisp five-pound note. "Come on, then. I'll stand you all ices, or anything else you like."

"Good egg!" cried the other, clapping his friend on the back, and delighted at the idea of having ices at somebody else's expense. "Marston's governor is evidently a sensible chap. Doesn't believe in his son having to exist on one-and-ninepence a day. Come on, you chaps!"

"Where shall we go?" Marston asked.

"Esmeralda's of course, fathead!" they all cried in chorus.

Before long the little party found themselves in the confectioner's shop which is well known to every midshipman who has ever visited Gib. in his ship, and seating himself

at one of the little marble-topped tables, Marston shouted for the waiter.

"Hi, Jose," he called, "bring ices! Let's see, you chaps, how many do we want?"

"Oh, a couple apiece'll do to start with," somebody volunteered.

"We want ten ices," the host ordered with an air of opulence as the attendant came forward, and holding up all the fingers of both hands. "Ten sixpenny ices. Savvy?"

The waiter grinned, for from long experience he well understood the insatiable appetites of midshipmen and their friends. "Strawberry, coffee, or vanilla, sar?" he asked.

"Oh, anything as long as it's cold and wet," murmured Marston, dabbing his heated face with his handkerchief. "I don't care tuppence what it is. And bring me the latest English paper while you're about it."

The waiter hurried off on his errand, and presently returning with a well-laden tray, the boys set to work to consume as much as they could in the shortest possible time.

"My eye!" remarked a small freckle-faced youth called Carruthers at last, laying down his spoon with a satisfied sigh. "Your governor's a good chap, Marston."

But the young officer addressed did not take the hint, for he was engrossed in his week-old English newspaper.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" he suddenly ejaculated.

"What's up?"

"Martin, what was the name of your ship?" he demanded with suppressed excitement.

"The *Saracen*," said Billy and Roger together. "Why d'you ask?"

"Well, just have a look at this!" he exclaimed, handing the paper across and pointing to a paragraph with his finger.

Billy and Roger bent over the sheet and read together.

"STRANGE STORY OF THE SEA"

"As reported in these columns some five weeks ago, two survivors of the barque *Saracen*, on passage from Hong-Kong to England, via Batavia, were rescued from Endeavour Island, in the South China Sea, by the British cruiser *Daphne*.

"Our readers will remember the dangers and vicissitudes through which these two youthful castaways passed, and their names, William Martin and Roger Wedderburn, will doubtless be familiar. A full narrative of the shipwreck, and of the lads' subsequent adventures, was forwarded by our Singapore correspondent at the time, and the thrilling events which befell these two boys could hardly be believed, had the truth of their story not been corroborated by the officers and men of the *Daphne*. An extraordinary sequel, however, has now arisen.

"It will be recollected that reports from Singapore stated the two lads were the sole survivors of the wreck, but Captain MacIver, of the barque *Bessie Cairns*, whose vessel arrived at Falmouth yesterday afternoon, reports that on Feb. 18th last, when in the vicinity of the Natuna Islands (South China Sea), he picked up an open boat containing Captain Wedderburn, Mr. Hardcastle, mate, and three seamen, William Jenkins, Peter Short, and George Edward Hallday—all belonging to the ill-fated *Saracen*. These unfortunate men had succeeded in getting to the boat, which had been washed clear when their ship struck the reef, and had been afloat for over forty-eight hours without food or water. Thanks, however, to the kind treatment they received on board the *Bessie Cairns*, they are now enjoying excellent health.

"Captain MacIver states that the passage from Hong-Kong to Falmouth was made direct, via the Sunda Straits and the Cape of Good Hope, and this accounts for the belated intelligence of the rescue.

"Captain Wedderburn and the other survivors proceeded to London by train, and declined to make any statement as to the cause of the *Saracen*'s loss. We understand, from the vessel's owners, that she was fully insured."

Roger read the news twice through without speaking. It was so utterly unexpected and sudden that it almost unnerved him, and he could hardly bring himself to

believe it. He had made up his mind for the worst, had become quite accustomed to the idea that his father had been drowned, and this sudden contradiction of what he had firmly believed almost knocked the breath out of his body. The effect on Billy, too, was much the same, and they both gazed at the paragraph until the small print seemed to dance before their eyes.

"Oh, Bill," murmured Roger at last, with a sob of joy in his throat, "d'you really think it's true?"

"Course it is!" declared the other. "They wouldn't publish a thing like that if they weren't absolutely certain. Mr. Hardcastle's been saved too! Oh, I am so jolly glad! D'you remember how I used to tell you that there was a chance they might have got away in the other boat?"

Roger nodded. "I wonder if they know we're coming home in the *Dorset*?" he asked excitedly. "I wrote home from Singapore, but I've had no answer to my letter."

"Perhaps we might let them know again," Billy suggested. "I wonder if a letter would fetch up in time?"

"Why don't you make certain by sending a cable?" Marston put in.

It was a good idea, and as soon as the bill had been paid they all left the restaurant together and wended their way to the telegraph office, from where a message was dispatched to Captain Wedderburn informing him of the probable date and time of the cruiser's arrival at Plymouth.

Two well-known figures were climbing up the accommodation ladder, for the great ship was at anchor in home waters, and an instant later Roger was clasped in his father's arms, while Billy was wringing Mr. Hardcastle's arm like a pump handle.

"There, there, Martin," the latter laughingly exclaimed, "you'll have my arm off in a minute!"

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you again, sir!" Billy cried.
"We both thought you'd been drowned."

"We very nearly were, my son, but not quite, and here we are, all alive and kicking."

Billy gave a happy laugh.

"Now then, Martin," exclaimed Captain Wedderburn, "let's have a look at you."

Billy turned round and confronted the skipper. "I'm awfully glad you got away all right, sir," he said rather nervously, for now that he was looking at Captain Wedderburn again he began to feel rather frightened. "Roger and I thought you'd been drowned."

The captain noticed the boy's hesitation, and held out his hand. "My boy," he said kindly, with the tears rising in his eyes, "don't be frightened of me. My son tells me you saved his life."

"I didn't do any more for him than he did for me, sir," Billy protested blushingly, and longing to punch Roger in the ribs. "You mustn't believe what he says, sir."

"I don't know so much about that, but what I want to say is that if you want a home my wife and myself will always be glad and proud to have you. I mean it, my boy," he added kindly. "You can come and make your home with us. I shan't forget what you've done for Roger. I'm not—" Here the captain stammered, and almost broke down with emotion.

"I did nothing, sir," Billy repeated, holding his hand. "I did nothing more than he did."

"You've brought me back my son, boy," the grizzled seaman murmured huskily; "and if that's nothing, I don't quite agree with you."

For some seconds they looked at each other without speaking.

But Mr. Hardcastle was getting anxious about the time, and pulling out his watch, suddenly broke in upon their

thoughts. "I've been thinking, sir," he said, "that if you want to catch the 1.35 train back to London we'd better be moving."

"I quite forgot," exclaimed the skipper, releasing Billy's hand. "Have you two lads got all your dunnage packed and ready?"

"Yes," answered Roger with a smile. "We've packed everything we have, but it's not much."

"All right, then; bring it along as soon as you can. We'd best be off."

An hour and a half later they were in the train on their way to London.

Captain MacDonald did not forget his promise, and, thanks to his influence with Sir Francis Holland, both Billy and Roger are now serving as apprentices in one of the largest vessels of the Eastern Shipping Company. They both like the life and are getting on well, and at present are working hard for the examination for promotion to second mate.

Captain Wedderburn himself has given up the sea, and lives with his wife in a small Surrey village, where he devotes most of his time to gardening. But whenever Billy and Roger get home to England they spend their brief leave with him. He is always glad to see them, and, true to his promise, treats Billy as if he was his son.

Mr. Hardcastle married soon after his arrival in England, and is now in command of a sailing ship, but whenever he has the chance he, too, visits the cottage which has come to be regarded as the headquarters of the *Saracen's* survivors. Hanging on the walls of the little abode are a couple of the rifles which played such a prominent part in the defence of Endeavour Island. Billy often takes them down and fingers them lovingly, but

their most treasured possession is the tattered Red Ensign which, in spite of everything, was kept flying to the last.

But what of Ah Sing?

He is still at Singapore, but is hardly recognizable as the active man whose faithfulness saved the boys' lives. The good food, easy life, and lack of strenuous exercise have made him fat, and Billy and Roger nearly had a shock the first time they saw him. They could hardly realize that the portly well-groomed Chinaman was the same man who had used a rifle to such good effect on the island, and in common with many of his countrymen he had cut off his pigtail and wore fearsome-looking European clothes. But in spite of the change in his outward appearance he was still the same Ah Sing, and will never forget the two best friends he has in the world, Massa Beely and Loger, as he still persists in calling them.

The loopholes in Hill Fort are overgrown with rank grass; the little cemetery close to Salvation Cove is almost unrecognizable in its thick covering of tangled undergrowth, but on the summit of the hill the mouldering remains of the tent and the shattered staves of the water casks, almost hidden in the long grass, still remain as mementoes of the fight.

The boys have never visited the place since, but for all that they will never forget it.

But our story is finished, and so, with the hope that they will never be called upon to face similar experiences again, we must leave the *Saracen* survivors to carve out their own destinies.

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